

# The indictment of David Morens and the threat posed by the hantavirus: A discussion with Peter Daszak

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*In late April 2026, a federal grand jury unsealed an indictment against Dr. David M. Morens, the former senior adviser to Anthony Fauci at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). The charges, which include five counts spanning conspiracy, destruction and falsification of federal records, and aiding and abetting, carry a theoretical maximum sentence of 51 years in prison.*

*The government's case rests on informal email exchanges routed through a personal Gmail account, collegial scientific coordination with EcoHealth Alliance and the acceptance of two bottles of wine from a longtime friend and collaborator, Dr. Peter Daszak. The disproportion between alleged conduct and threatened punishment is so extreme as to be self-revealing. This is not a prosecution in service of justice but a political vendetta against scientific truth and inquiry into the social crimes behind the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, for which those bringing the prosecution against Morens are squarely to blame.*

*Morens is 78 years old. He is board-certified in pediatrics. He served in the Epidemic Intelligence Service and wore the uniform of the U.S. Public Health Service, deploying into outbreak zones and spending two years doing high-risk research on Lassa fever in Sierra Leone. For decades, he served as Fauci's principal specialist on emerging viral threats, the person responsible for synthesizing the latest unpublished science from the field and getting it into the hands of decision-makers before a crisis became a catastrophe.*

*This is precisely what his indictment criminalizes. His job was to talk to scientists. His job was to ensure that the director of NIAID and, through him, the White House operated based on the best available evidence. That the Trump administration has now constructed a federal conspiracy from the performance of those duties tells us everything about the nature of this prosecution and about the political project it serves.*

*The indictment of Morens cannot be understood in isolation. It is a single element within a coordinated campaign to weaponize the COVID-19 pandemic narrative for geopolitical and domestic political ends. What began in early 2020 as a fringe conspiracy theory promoted by figures like Steve Bannon and Miles Guo, the claim that SARS-CoV-2 was engineered and deliberately released from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was elevated over the following years into mainstream Republican doctrine, with the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic serving as its institutional engine. That committee publicly vilified Morens in 2024, using his informal email practices as the fulcrum to validate a broader campaign against the scientists who advocated for an evidence-based pandemic response. The indictment is the legal culmination of what began as a McCarthyite show trial.*

*The scientific record has never supported the lab leak hypothesis. Spatial analyses of the earliest cases cluster tightly around the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, independent of employment or shopping*

*history. Environmental swabs from specific market stalls, including one documented to have housed caged raccoon dogs, were heavily positive for SARS-CoV-2. Metagenomic sequencing identified the mitochondrial DNA of susceptible intermediate hosts, such as raccoon dogs, hoary bamboo rats and palm civets, in samples simultaneously positive for viral RNA.*

*Phylogenetic analysis revealed two distinct viral lineages circulating at the market simultaneously, indicating at least two independent zoonotic spillover events, a scenario that renders a coordinated laboratory origin a statistical impossibility. None of this evidence has been refuted nor has an alternative plausible lab leak scenario ever been proposed to support the evidence that exists. Yet, in April 2025, the Trump administration repurposed covid.gov from a portal for vaccines and Long COVID resources into a propaganda hub titled, "Lab Leak: The True Origins of COVID-19," officially codifying a debunked conspiracy theory as state doctrine.*

*The purpose of this manufactured narrative extends beyond domestic politics. The lab leak fiction provides the ideological scaffolding for anti-China aggression, which includes punitive tariffs, diplomatic rupture and the broader militarized posture of US imperialism in the Pacific. Morens, Fauci, Daszak and the network of scientists who worked to understand and contain the virus are not the main targets. They are proxies. The main targets are the institutions of public health, scientific independence and international cooperation that stand, however inadequately, between the working class and the next catastrophic outbreak.*

*Yet, that next outbreak may already be upon us.*

*In early April 2026, the MV Hondius, a luxury expedition vessel, departed Ushuaia, Argentina, bound for Antarctica and the South Atlantic—carrying passengers who were almost certainly already infected. The leading hypothesis among Argentine investigators is that a Dutch couple, experienced birdwatchers who had spent months traveling through South America, contracted the Andes strain of hantavirus at a rodent-infested landfill on the outskirts of Ushuaia before boarding. The Andes strain is the only known hantavirus capable of human-to-human transmission, with a case fatality rate approaching 40 percent. The first passenger died aboard ship on April 11 under circumstances recorded as unexplained. No samples were taken. By the time the World Health Organization (WHO) was formally notified on May 2, some passengers had already disembarked and dispersed across multiple continents. Three people linked to the voyage have since died.*

*However, the institutional scaffolding that might have contained this outbreak at the source has been methodically dismantled. The West African Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases (WAC-EID), part of the NIH-funded CREID network specifically tasked with studying zoonotic spillover pathogens including hantavirus, was shut down by a stop-work order in June 2025. The CDC's vessel sanitation program, the very*

program responsible for monitoring disease on international ships, lost all its inspectors to Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) cuts. The United States has withdrawn from the World Health Organization, severing the formal communication channels through which outbreak data flows. The scientists who spent careers building these systems are being prosecuted, fired or silenced.

Now, leading the US public health response to the hantavirus outbreak is Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, who rose to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic by attacking lockdowns and social distancing and who now simultaneously serves as NIH director and acting CDC director, or, in effect, CDC director. His first public appearance on the outbreak, a CNN interview in early May 2026, was a spectacle of incompetence. He was unable to articulate what his own agency was doing. He repeated the refrain that has now become the administration's signature approach to infectious disease—that this is not COVID, and all measures are being taken to protect the public, even as passengers are being released to self-monitor at home despite the known human-to-human transmission with this strain.

This is not a matter of administrative incompetence. It is a deliberate policy. As Peter Daszak observes in the conversation that follows, the destruction of pandemic preparedness serves a coherent ideological function. It advances what might be called “health freedom,” or the doctrine that individuals and not governments bear sole responsibility for their survival in the face of infectious disease. This doctrine is the public health expression of the same class logic that has governed the response to COVID-19 from the beginning, the logic that permitted more than a million Americans to die rather than impose costs on capital. The pandemic was not mismanaged; it was managed in the interests of the ruling class, at the expense of the working class.

The indictment of David Morens and the hantavirus outbreak aboard the MV *Hondius* are not coincidental juxtapositions. They are expressions of the same underlying crisis or the systematic subordination of public health to the imperatives of geopolitical aggression, domestic political repression and the defense of private profit. Understanding this connection is the starting point for any serious political response.

## Who is David Morens?

**Benjamin Mateus (BM):** Before we get into the legal and political dimensions of the indictment, I want to ask you something that almost no one covers in this case. Who is David Morens—not the DOJ's caricature, not the congressional subcommittee's villain, but the person you know? How did you two meet, and what kind of scientist and human being is he?

**Peter Daszak (PD):** What makes this situation so tragic is that he is simply an extremely good person, and a profoundly dedicated public servant. He is board-certified in pediatrics, a medical doctor. He served in the CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service and did active duty for the U.S. Public Health Service—uniformed service, going directly into outbreak zones. He spent two years doing research on Lassa fever in Sierra Leone. That is a highly lethal disease, and this was high-risk work. Here is someone with exceptional gifts to offer in responding to outbreaks like the one we are seeing right now with hantavirus. Someone who has served this country, and who is now under federal indictment.

He is originally from Hawaii, which is somewhat unusual. He has children. He loves opera—my brother is an opera singer, and we discovered somewhat randomly that David owns some of his recordings. He is drawn to obscure Russian opera. He is a cultured man, an old-fashioned man, and a lifelong public servant. He is not someone who was attacking the government or pushing an agenda from within. What has happened to him

is quite tragic.

He is also a productive and insightful scientist who has published hundreds of papers and has spent his career doing exactly what we need: passing on critical, cutting-edge information to senior management at NIAID so that decision-makers are prepared when outbreaks emerge. That is precisely the capacity this country is destroying.

**BM:** He spent decades at NIAID, much of it as Fauci's senior adviser. What did that work look like on a day-to-day basis? What was his specific contribution to how the United States understood and responded to emerging infectious disease threats?

**PD:** Ironically, the indictment itself describes it, because they published part of his job description as supporting evidence. As senior adviser to the director of NIAID, his responsibility was to be conversant with the frontiers of knowledge about emerging viral infections—to meet with scientists, to talk to NIAID grantees working on these viruses, to understand not just what had been published but what was being discovered in real time. When Tony Fauci was called to brief the White House about an emerging pathogen, he needed someone who had already done that reconnaissance. David Morens was that person.

The system worked well for years. It worked during COVID, in fact, up until the point when conspiracy theories began crowding out the science and the political attacks began. When our grant at EcoHealth Alliance (EHA) was *illegally* terminated by President Trump on April 24, 2020, I did what any scientist would do: I reached out to colleagues I trusted for advice. I should add that when I say *illegally*, this was the essential finding in the Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (OIG) January 2023 report to describe the termination of the EHA grant. The OIG investigated the circumstances that led to the cancellation and one of their findings was that the termination was “improper,” i.e., illegal, or broke the rules that NIH is legally required to operate under.

I called David Morens and he told me to talk to everyone I knew, document everything, answer all questions and trust that the illegal decision would eventually be reversed. It was. NIH reinstated the grant because no legal basis for the termination could be established. David Morens had nothing to do with that reinstatement. His job was not to manage grants. His job was to ensure that the director of NIAID had the best available information.

**BM:** The DOJ has constructed a federal conspiracy from what amounts to Gmail correspondence and informal scientific coordination between you, Morens and other colleagues over matters that appear, at their most serious, to be mean-spirited but consequential communications. Meanwhile, others in this administration who have committed far more serious record violations have received complete passes. What does this selective, weaponized prosecution tell us about what this indictment is actually for?

**PD:** It is a vindictive political prosecution—an attempt to cruelly and deliberately make an example of someone who is not the real target. David Morens is not the real target. The real targets are Fauci and the Biden administration and the broader effort to bolster Trump's narrative that other people mismanaged the pandemic. Not him. Not the president who demonstrably failed to act on expert advice, who pushed back against the very science his own administration was receiving.

The specific allegations—using a personal Gmail account for some of his communications with close associates, coordinating informally with scientists in the field and accepting two bottles of wine from a longtime friend—are these the alleged crimes for which he's being prosecuted? Ivanka Trump used private email for government business. Hillary Clinton ran a private server. Colin Powell used his AOL account. How do we interpret all this but to say that the selective application of the law is itself politically revealing. What distinguishes David Morens is not the severity of his conduct but the usefulness of his prosecution to the Trump administration's political objectives.

The underlying theory of the conspiracy, as far as I can parse it, is that Morens conspired to suppress debate over COVID's origins. Even accepting that framing entirely, I cannot identify the criminal statute. Suppressing debate in a free speech country is not a crime. But more fundamentally, what was called "debate" was not a debate, but an accusation. The lab leak allegations were serious claims that demanded serious fact checking. I examined every one of them. There was no credible evidentiary basis for any of them.

**BM:** The indictment also serves the geopolitical function of keeping the lab leak theory in circulation, or, in other words, putting anti-Chinese sentiment back on stage for use as an ideological weapon.

**PD:** The lab leak theory was never a harmless intellectual debate. An allegation that a pandemic was caused by a laboratory accident—or something worse—is a serious geopolitical charge with real consequences for international relations. What concerned me was never the political inconvenience of the allegation. What concerned me was that if our work had any connection to what happened, I needed to know. I approached every allegation with that seriousness. There was never any credible factual basis for any of them. The science on this is unambiguous. What is being pursued is not the truth about COVID's origins. It is a pretext for anti-China aggression and the ongoing dismantlement of the public health infrastructure.

**BM:** The West African Centre for Emerging Infectious Diseases, part of the NIH's CREID network, which was established specifically to study zoonotic spillover pathogens including hantavirus, was shut down by a stop-work order in June 2025. The principal investigator was Scott Weaver, a professor at the University of Texas Medical Branch, and roughly \$100,000 from the program would have gone toward a hantavirus study in Argentina, precisely where this outbreak originated.

CDC's vessel sanitation program lost all its inspectors to DOGE cuts. The United States withdrew from the WHO. And now David Morens is under federal indictment. Is this one campaign, and if so, what is its internal logic? What is being built in place of what is being destroyed?

**PD:** You ask the right question: What is the goal? The campaign to dismantle pandemic science, emerging disease surveillance, climate research, vaccines—What is it actually for? The answer is that it is a campaign to eliminate organized opposition to a right-wing governing agenda. On climate, that agenda means fossil fuel expansion. On pandemics, it means what I would call health freedom—the doctrine that individuals bear sole responsibility for behavior during an outbreak, for their decisions about exposing themselves or others to a pathogen and that the government has no obligation to protect them. You could hear exactly this from Bhattacharya in his first CNN appearance on the hantavirus outbreak, fumbling through talking points he clearly did not understand, repeating the mantra, "This is not COVID, just relax."

That ideology—don't worry, it will go away, go about your business—is not ignorance. It is policy. And it has replaced the institutional infrastructure with nothing. Thousands of scientists have been fired. Critical grants on outbreak control and emerging diseases have been defunded. The agencies have been gutted. We are not just less prepared for this specific outbreak. We are more vulnerable to earthquakes, hurricanes, climate disruption and future pandemics. And the people placed in charge of the agencies that are supposed to manage these crises are, in several cases, people who have spent their careers arguing that those agencies should not exist.

**BM:** The situation with the MV *Hondius* is alarming. A person died on the ship and was recorded as natural causes—a doctor on a vessel would not have missed signs of serious infection. There was no communication to public health authorities. Passengers were allowed to disembark and re-embark. A second person died before the WHO was even notified. Now we have people who tested positive after returning to Zurich, others being repatriated on commercial aircraft and told simply to monitor themselves

at home. There is documented human-to-human transmission of a virus with a case fatality rate approaching 40 percent. And governments are calling this a very low risk to the public.

**PD:** It is inadequate both in terms of actual infection control and in terms of providing the public with the honest reassurance that comes from demonstrable competence. Let me be precise about the risk. This virus does not spread with anything like the efficiency of SARS-CoV-2. It is possible, perhaps likely, that this specific outbreak will not become a major epidemic. But Ebola is the lesson here. For decades, Ebola caused outbreaks of a few dozen to a few hundred cases at most. That was the established understanding of its behavior. Then in West Africa in 2014, it reached a densely populated urban environment, and the outbreak grew to nearly 30,000 cases. The prior track record was *not* a guarantee of future behavior.

The same logic applies to hantavirus. If one of my family members were infected right now, I would not be treating this casually. We would be in strict self-imposed quarantine, ideally in a medical establishment, because this virus has an incubation period that may extend six to eight weeks, and because the transmission dynamics aboard the *Hondius* demonstrate that human-to-human spread is occurring. Telling people to go home and monitor their symptoms and temperature is not an adequate response. It will generate more cases, and those cases will generate further public panic and a panic that the current leadership of HHS and CDC is singularly unqualified to manage.

The public does not only need physical protection from infectious diseases. They need confidence that qualified, trained, level-headed professionals are managing the response. That confidence is completely absent when an anti-vaccine ideologue runs HHS and an anti-masking economist who played epidemiologist during the last pandemic runs outbreak response at NIH and CDC.

**BM:** I want to raise something directly. I think it would be a mistake to simply counterpose Biden to Trump on pandemic management. The dismantling of emergency public health measures, the failure to defend Morens or EcoHealth Alliance, Fauci's statements about the live Omicron vaccine—there has been a bipartisan failure to defend public health from the financial interests that find it inconvenient. The logic of social murder did not begin with Trump.

**PD:** I am not entirely disagreeing. The failure of Democrats to fight back—not just politically but institutionally—has been striking and, to me, genuinely shocking. Organizations and individuals who should have been outraged by what was happening to EcoHealth Alliance and to scientific freedom more broadly mostly kept quiet. The national academies. Professional societies. Senators and members of Congress. Even colleagues in the field were more likely to look the other way than to risk association with a target. And that silence inspired exactly what we are now seeing: a systematic picking-off of scientists, one by one, as vindictive examples designed to keep everyone else quiet.

What I can say clearly is that the motives driving this campaign are financial and political—the suppression of science that inconveniences the fossil fuel industry, the insurance industry, the pharmaceutical industry's preference for therapeutic over preventive approaches and the political and economic leaders who repeatedly proposed measures based on it being cheaper to let people get sick than to build the systems that prevent illness. This pattern—manufacture doubt, attack the science, attack the scientists—is precisely what happened with tobacco, with climate change, with vaccines and now with COVID origins and pandemic preparedness. History will judge this moment. And it will not be kind.



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