

And then they come back, and they are changed, and we say we are not going to take care of them because we need information right now, this very minute, when it is not even on the floor. We need the information—when I have already made a commitment to the ranking member that we are going to have this information. But, no, what we are going to do is we are going to stop the VA from having a slate of candidates so they can do their jobs and service the veterans.

Guess what. I am not a veteran. This doesn't impact me, but it impacts the veterans in my State, some 100,000 of them—1 in 10 Montanans—and, in fact, veterans all across this country.

We can sit here and we can play these games of holding up nominees to fill critical Agency departments, and we can play them and play them and play them again, and we can say we are doing it on behalf of the veterans. That is bull—you got it—total bull.

We have a job to do here, folks. If we don't want to confirm well-qualified folks, then, why don't we just shut down the VA? Why don't we tell McDonough that he is out of luck, that we are not going to send him any help? And then we start making demands.

The bottom line is this, folks: All the things Senator BLACKBURN is concerned about, I made a commitment with the ranking member that we are going to get those questions answered, and we will get them answered with good information. And then if the ranking member consents, we will have a vote and we will have debate, and we will make a determination whether this is the right thing to do.

But just to say, "No, we are stopping everything right now; no more toxic exposure bill until I get this information because we are not going to send you the staff to do your job," doesn't make a lot of sense to me. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me. And in the process our veterans suffer. That veteran who has hypertension dies—one less problem for the VA, because we created the problem right here today.

I would ask Senator BLACKBURN to reconsider her hold so we can get the VA the staff they need so they can do their job.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Tennessee.

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, you know, it is truly an honor to work with the veterans in Tennessee, and we have hundreds of thousands of veterans in our State.

I know that the chairman says he prides himself in working with the veterans. I will tell you, quite frankly, I consider it a humbling experience to work with these veterans. Whether they are from World War II or Korea or Vietnam or whether they are from any of our recent wars—the Mideast—whether we are dealing with Agent Orange or burn pits, to me it is heart-wrenching to hear their stories.

And the VA has not done their job. So what we are doing is standing up for

these veterans and saying to the VA: Get your act together. Provide this information. How do you deal with this backlog? Do you have the capability to deal with what we are discussing? Do you have that capability? What is your capacity? How do we best handle these issues?

The VA, for years—decades, decades, decades—has not done their job in a timely manner, in a responsive manner to our Nation's veterans. Therefore, let's say: Let's get this right. Let's get it right.

Excuse me. There is a fly in this Chamber.

Let's get it right now.

CORONAVIRUS

Mrs. BLACKBURN. Mr. President, last week's conversations about our own government's role in the COVID coverup reflected over a year of refusal on the part of my Democratic colleagues to accept that the novel coronavirus may not have spread via natural transmission from a Chinese wildlife wet market.

As the theories of the pandemic's origins evolved, one remained, until very recently, off limits. This is, of course, the lab leak hypothesis, or the theory that the virus somehow escaped from a lab in Wuhan, China.

Now, this theory didn't come out of nowhere. In early January 2020, alarm bells were already ringing at the CDC, the State Department, and in the scientific community over problems with the natural origin theory of transmission.

Virologists and other public health officials studying the disease were quickly coming to the conclusion that the way the virus was spreading suggested that this theory was flawed. Officials also knew that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was conducting controversial and dangerous "gain of function" research with the help of repackaged U.S. Government grants.

Yes, that is correct.

In April of last year, I joined many of my colleagues in publicly demanding a thorough investigation into the lab leak theory. What followed was nothing less than moral panic. Activists, journalists, and even our own Democratic colleagues accused us of racism, xenophobia, and science denial.

Major media organizations refused to report on the hypothesis, except to decry it as a racist attack on Chinese scientists. Facebook banned accounts that posted about it. YouTube deleted videos that dared contradict the World Health Organization.

Rather than scaring us off, though, these attacks left us with another question to answer: Why did the very idea of investigating the Wuhan lab inspire such a bizarre panic? Or, perhaps, the better question is, Why did NIAID Director Dr. Fauci and the rest of the powers that be publicly insist that the idea of a lab leak was completely preposterous?

Even NIH Director Francis Collins hadn't ruled it out. In a March 2020 interview with the Atlantic, he said that while natural transmission was the likely culprit, "the possibility that such a naturally evolved virus might have also been under study at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and reached residents of Wuhan—and ultimately the rest of the world—as the result of a lab accident has never been adequately excluded."

We certainly have evidence to show that mistakes happen, even in a professional lab. Who could forget that back in 2015, we saw reports that personnel at a military facility in Utah accidentally shipped active samples of anthrax to labs in nine States—yes, a 2015 lab accident.

NIH has also had problems keeping track of things. According to a memo prepared in 2016 by a minority staff of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, a 2009 Department of Health and Human Services OIG audit found an inventory discrepancy at the NIH caused in part by mislabeled envelopes containing unregistered vials of plague and other antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

In 2012, NIH researchers found vials of anthrax spores in the wrong place. What is worse, the scientists in that particular lab weren't registered to possess them.

In 2014, an FDA researcher working at the NIH campus in Bethesda discovered vials of live smallpox virus stuffed in a cardboard box in an unsecured cold storage room.

Mistakes were clearly made. Lab accidents happen. It is also clear that while a leak from the Wuhan lab could have happened due to human error, this coverup we are now learning about certainly did not happen by error.

We now have an emerging picture of what did happen behind the scenes to create so much resistance to the lab leak theory.

On June 3 of this year, that bastion of rightwing insanity known as Vanity Fair magazine published an investigative report exposing the deranged political gamesmanship that prompted public health officials to paint the lab leak theory as a conspiracy.

The report confirmed just about everything those officials wanted to keep hidden—namely, that the lab leak hypothesis was suppressed at multiple levels of government by officials looking to protect their own interests and to distance themselves from President Donald Trump—so much for following the science. They were following emotions.

The report confirmed conflicts of interest concerning grant awards that supported gain-of-function research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The same people who knew that Chinese scientists were performing these dangerous experiments on the taxpayer dime also knew from verified intelligence reports that three Wuhan-based researchers fell ill with COVID-like symptoms in November 2019, well before the first reported outbreak. Still,

State Department officials warned investigators to abandon their inquiries into the origins of COVID-19 because it would “open a can of worms.”

The internal coverups bled into this year until, finally, 5 days before President Biden took the oath of office, the State Department put out a fact sheet on the Wuhan lab that confirmed the November outbreak and revealed that scientists working there had collaborated with the Chinese military on classified research. The Biden administration has yet to walk any of this back.

We are also finally seeing some interest in the World Health Organization’s Beijing-controlled investigation into the Wuhan lab. On March 1 of this year and again on May 24, I laid out my concerns to the White House about the WHO’s reliance on the Chinese Communist Party for funding and support. I explained how this reliance drove their initial support for Beijing’s response to the outbreaks and ruined the integrity of their investigation. The White House has yet to respond to my concerns, but it is not going to be able to avoid responding because the American people are demanding the answers.

I think it is important to state for the record that what we are seeing in these news reports is not entirely new information. The foundations of the lab leak hypothesis remain much the same as they were a year ago. So why pop open that can of worms right now? Because there is no way to sweep this thing back under the rug.

We have the sudden interest of the media. Imagine that. We also have an entire body of published statements and investigative reporting from inside China. Facebook and YouTube have reversed their content policies, which means they couldn’t stop people from sharing this information unless they pulled the plug on the entire internet which, obviously, isn’t an option.

We also have the magic of FOIA on our side. We learned from Dr. Fauci’s published emails that he knew about the dangerous research happening in China. He was aware. We know he allowed inquiries into the Wuhan lab leak theory to go unanswered. We also know he worked with Mark Zuckerberg to determine what COVID-related information flowed into the public timeline and when that information went out.

Now, I stand by my criticism of Dr. Fauci. His dystopian comments equating attacks on his job performance with attacks on science are unacceptable, but I want to encourage everyone to not make this about one person. We now have evidence that public officials were eating each other alive over political disagreements and that these disagreements derailed investigations into the origins of COVID-19.

This is more than just political failure; it is a moral inversion that empowered one of the globe’s most violent authoritarian governments. The Chinese officials who hid the existence of

the novel coronavirus from international bodies are the very same Chinese officials who gunned down freedom fighters in Hong Kong, who unleashed political violence in Inner Mongolia and Tibet, and who continue to commit ongoing genocide against Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang.

It is time for Congress to get serious about cleaning up this mess. I reiterate the same demands I made more than a year ago for a full and unbiased inquiry into the lab leak hypothesis and a broader investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last week, I joined Senator COTTON in reintroducing the Li Wenliang Global Public Health Accountability Act. This legislation would authorize the President to sanction foreign officials who suppress or distort information about international public health crises, including COVID-19. I encourage my colleagues to sign on to the bill.

Most importantly, I would implore my Democratic colleagues to engage in a little introspection. The officials implicated in this coverup swept science under the rug, orchestrated a relentless smear campaign, throttled the flow of public information, and allowed the Chinese Communist Party to exonerate itself at the expense of truth and accountability.

You don’t have to defend this. Please, have the moral courage to make the right choice, and join us in our demands for unbiased investigations into the origin of the pandemic.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD the referenced fact sheet and letters. The referenced articles and report can be found online at www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/francis-collins-nih/619065, www.vanityfair.com/news/2021/06/the-lab-leak-theory-inside-the-fight-to-uncover-covid-19s-origins, and osp.od.nih.gov/wp-content/uploads/BRP-House-EC-Report.pdf.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

FACT SHEET ACTIVITY AT THE WUHAN INSTITUTE OF VIROLOGY—UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Fact Sheet
January 15, 2021

For more than a year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has systematically prevented a transparent and thorough investigation of the COVID-19 pandemic’s origin, choosing instead to devote enormous resources to deceit and disinformation. Nearly two million people have died. Their families deserve to know the truth. Only through transparency can we learn what caused this pandemic and how to prevent the next one.

The U.S. government does not know exactly where, when, or how the COVID-19 virus—known as SARS-CoV-2—was transmitted initially to humans. We have not determined whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan, China.

The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic. Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak

if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection. Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure.

The CCP’s deadly obsession with secrecy and control comes at the expense of public health in China and around the world. The previously undisclosed information in this fact sheet, combined with open-source reporting, highlights three elements about COVID-19’s origin that deserve greater scrutiny:

1. ILLNESSES INSIDE THE WUHAN INSTITUTE OF VIROLOGY (WIV)

The U.S. government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli’s public claim that there was “zero infection” among the WIV’s staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.

Accidental infections in labs have caused several previous virus outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing that infected nine people, killing one.

The CCP has prevented independent journalists, investigators, and global health authorities from interviewing researchers at the WIV, including those who were ill in the fall of 2019. Any credible inquiry into the origin of the virus must include interviews with these researchers and a full accounting of their previously unreported illness.

2. RESEARCH AT THE WIV

Starting in at least 2016—and with no indication of a stop prior to the COVID-19 outbreak—WIV researchers conducted experiments involving RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). The WIV became a focal point for international coronavirus research after the 2003 SARS outbreak and has since studied animals including mice, bats, and pangolins.

The WIV has a published record of conducting “gain-of-function” research to engineer chimeric viruses. But the WIV has not been transparent or consistent about its record of studying viruses most similar to the COVID-19 virus, including “RaTG13,” which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners died of SARS-like illness.

WHO investigators must have access to the records of the WIV’s work on bat and other coronaviruses before the COVID-19 outbreak. As part of a thorough inquiry, they must have a full accounting of why the WIV altered and then removed online records of its work with RaTG13 and other viruses.

3. SECRET MILITARY ACTIVITY AT THE WIV

Secrecy and non-disclosure are standard practice for Beijing. For many years the United States has publicly raised concerns about China’s past biological weapons work, which Beijing has neither documented nor demonstrably eliminated, despite its clear obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention.

Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the United States has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China’s military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.

The United States and other donors who funded or collaborated on civilian research

at the WIV have a right and obligation to determine whether any of our research funding was diverted to secret Chinese military projects at the WIV.

Today's revelations just scratch the surface of what is still hidden about COVID-19's origin in China. Any credible investigation into the origin of COVID-19 demands complete, transparent access to the research labs in Wuhan, including their facilities, samples, personnel, and records.

As the world continues to battle this pandemic—and as WHO investigators begin their work, after more than a year of delays—the virus's origin remains uncertain. The United States will continue to do everything it can to support a credible and thorough investigation, including by continuing to demand transparency on the part of Chinese authorities.

MARCH 1, 2021.

Hon. JOSEPH R. BIDEN, JR.,
President of the United States,
Washington, DC.

DEAR PRESIDENT BIDEN: The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a significant toll on American life as well as the U.S. economy. Test kits, antibody therapies, and vaccine development have occurred in record time due to Operation Warp Speed and the ingenuity of the private sector. However, the investigation into the origins of the pandemic are not complete. Without this knowledge, it will be difficult to prevent a future, similar pandemic. I urge you to use your leadership to ensure investigations by the World Health Organization (WHO) are free from conflicts of interest.

Concerns have been raised about the lack of transparency of the events that took place at the time the outbreak started in Wuhan, China. In addition, concerns have been raised regarding the manner in which World Health Organization investigators were chosen to study the outbreak and some of the conflicts of interest that exist in those investigators.

Following the 2014 breakdown of security measures that resulted in cross contamination with a dangerous bird flu strain and the accidental mailing of live anthrax spores from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to other labs, Tom Frieden, the director of the CDC under president Obama testified "We also need to encourage a culture of openness and effective reporting of past or future incidents—since a key aspect of effective response is to support rapid reporting of problems."

On February 13, 2021, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said, "We have deep concerns about the way in which the early findings of the COVID-19 investigation were communicated and questions about the process used to reach them. It is imperative that this report be independent, with expert findings free from intervention or alteration by the Chinese government."

Transparency is an issue upon which we can agree. In light of that, I respectfully request you use your leadership to ensure the ongoing investigation of the COVID-19 pandemic origin be free from conflict of interest. WHO should be required to have independent investigators to conduct this study. WHO should not include researchers with conflicts of interest or with a lack of experience in forensic investigation. We owe this to the over 500,000 Americans who have died from this disease, to their families, and to future Americans who face possible pandemics.

Sincerely,

MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. Senator.

MAY 24, 2021.

Hon. JOSEPH R. BIDEN, JR.,
President of the United States,
Washington, DC.

DEAR PRESIDENT BIDEN: I write to follow-up on my March 1, 2021 letter with lingering concerns about the validity of the World Health Organization's (WHO) investigation into the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prior reports appear to confirm that the WHO had "little power to conduct a thorough, impartial examination." On May 13, 2021, in a letter published in *Science*, a group of 19 prominent scientists called for a deeper investigation of the two primary hypotheses: 1) the virus began to spread after jumping from infected animals to humans; and 2) the virus was accidentally released from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology and began spreading in the human population.

Among other issues, these scientists call into question the China-WHO joint study's consideration of the two main hypotheses stating, "Only 4 of the 313 pages of the report and its annexes addressed the possibility of a laboratory accident." This fact is deeply concerning in light of recent media reports that, "[t]hree researchers from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology became sick enough in November 2019 that they sought hospital care."

In light of these reports and my continued concerns, please respond, in writing, to the following questions:

1. According to reports, the WHO asked the U.S. government to recommend three experts for the China-WHO joint investigation team. Although they were not ultimately selected, another U.S. scientist was selected for the team.

a. Please name the three scientists recommended by the U.S., and articulate the WHO's reasoning for not choosing these individuals.

2. Beijing has refused to share critical raw data on the initial cases of COVID-19 in China. Has Beijing provided the U.S. with that data? If not, please explain why.

3. The China-WHO joint investigation stated that they "lacked expertise and access to investigate a potential lab leak." What will the administration do to insure that competent, impartial experts are involved in future investigations?

4. WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic said the organization was not mandated to do a forensic audit. Why was this the case? Will your administration insist on a fulsome forensic audit for future outbreaks?

I request the courtesy of a reply by June 14, 2021.

Sincerely,

MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. Senator.

Mrs. BLACKBURN. I yield the floor.
The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Nebraska.

FOR THE PEOPLE ACT OF 2021

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I would like to speak for a moment about S. 1.

This bill says that politicians and unelected bureaucrats who spend their entire careers in the same few square miles of Washington, DC, know how to run Nebraska's elections better than Nebraskans. I was glad to see the senior Senator from West Virginia come out against S. 1 and provide some much-needed honesty about what some Democrats' true intentions are with this bill.

I think he summed up this issue well when he wrote in his op-ed: "Today's

debate about how to best protect our right to vote and to hold elections, however, is not about finding common ground, but seeking partisan advantage."

As I said at the Rules Committee's markup for S. 1 a few weeks ago, I simply cannot understand why so many of my Democratic colleagues would like to hand over the control of our elections to the Federal Government.

To take one example, this bill would allow candidates for the Senate to receive Federal funding for their campaigns through a new program supported by Federal dollars. That would include a 6-to-1 match for contributions up to \$200, meaning that, if a donor gives \$100, Federal dollars coming from taxpayers would match that with \$600 more.

During the bill's markup, I offered an amendment to prevent sitting Members of the Senate from benefiting from this windfall, but it was rejected by all of my Democratic colleagues on the committee. This does not help voters make informed decisions. This only helps those of us who are already here in Congress. The changes S. 1 proposes only get more radical from there.

This bill would effectively turn the bipartisan six-member Federal Election Commission—the agency that oversees the financing of Federal elections—into a five-person panel subject to partisan control by giving the sitting President the power to appoint an independent fifth Commissioner to the agency. Because only a slim majority would then be needed to make a decision, this Commissioner could act as the deciding vote on issues that have historically been bipartisan.

If Senate Republicans were still in the majority and I told you that our leader wanted to pass a bill that would tip the balance of the FEC toward our party, those on the other side would object, and they would be right to do so. This Commission must remain truly bipartisan, and that is done by having equal Democratic and Republican membership.

S. 1 would also repeal an appropriations amendment that helps ensure the IRS does not infringe on the First Amendment rights of taxpayers who contribute to nonprofits. Allowing the IRS to possess this information when it is not a campaign finance enforcement agency only empowers bad actors at the agency to target groups that it dislikes. This is especially problematic given the recent leak of sensitive taxpayer information, and the IRS's history of targeting tax-exempt applicants solely based on their political leanings.

Also, this bill would not only allow people to register to vote at a polling place on election day without presenting any form of identification, it would tell the 36 States that have some form of voter ID laws on the books now that those laws would be illegal. This is despite the fact that a majority of Americans supports requiring photo ID