

Offline: The origin story—division deepens

After more than a year of contentious debate about the origins of SARS-CoV-2, David Relman and colleagues, including Alina Chan and Michael Worobey, published a letter in *Science* on May 14, 2021, arguing that a more forensic examination was needed. They noted that an inquiry commissioned by WHO had concluded that a lab leak was “extremely unlikely”. But they criticised WHO for not taking this possibility more seriously. They called for a more transparent, objective, and independent investigation. Perhaps not surprisingly, some in the news media used the letter by Relman and colleagues to turn the possibility of a lab leak into a probability. China was again targeted for particular blame, accused once more of a cover-up. What was the truth?

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To be clear, the lab leak theory was and remains a perfectly legitimate line of inquiry. Even Anthony Fauci has called for greater openness about work that took place in the Wuhan Institute of Virology. And it is surely right to be concerned about the security of 59 Wuhan-like biosafety level 4 laboratories in 23 countries across the world today. But the attacks in the media have become less about science and more about personalities. Jeremy Farrar was targeted by one UK newspaper under the headline “British head of Wellcome Trust is accused of a ‘chilling’ bid to stifle debate on a lab leak theory”. Now under massive pressure, WHO backtracked on the conclusions of its independent inquiry. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus argued that “every hypothesis should be open”. In June, 2021, at the G7 meeting in the UK, US President Joe Biden said he remained undecided about the origins of SARS-CoV-2. China’s leaders doubled down. They denied the possibility of a lab leak. They denied that so-called gain of function research had taken place in Wuhan. And they dismissed all attempts by the international community to investigate laboratories in the city. Indeed, by the summer of 2021 Beijing officials tried to invert the argument, calling on Washington to launch an inquiry into a military laboratory in Maryland as a potential source of SARS-CoV-2. The US Government responded by publishing a report from its intelligence services, concluding that they were unable to reach a definitive view about what happened in Wuhan. The

Chinese Government threatened a “counter-attack” against America.

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Scientists now intervened to calm these troubled political waters. Linda Saif and colleagues wrote in *The Lancet*: “Endless arguments back and forth about the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, pitting evolution and spillover in nature against a laboratory leak do little to advance our critical knowledge base.” They argued that an environment of recrimination—with “implicit or explicit blame” being placed on the Chinese Government—made it impossible to discover the truth about how the pandemic began. Chinese scientists had largely remained silent on these questions. But in September, 2021, they put that reticence to one side. Chen Wang, President of the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, together with colleagues in Beijing and Wuhan, wrote in *The Lancet* that a lab leak was, indeed, “extremely unlikely”. But they did not rule it out completely. And they agreed there was still no agreed conclusion about the origins of SARS-CoV-2. They also agreed that viruses could be made in a laboratory. But they defended what they believed were rigorous administrative and supervisory systems in China’s high-level biosafety settings. And they went on to make a plea. SARS-CoV-2 was “a common enemy of humankind” and so “humankind must work together”—“extensive international cooperation” was the only way to solve this puzzle. These words seemed to be directed to China’s political leaders as much as they were to western counterparts. Meanwhile, new voices continued to enter the fray. Matt Ridley and Alina Chan recently published their analysis in *Viral: The Search for the Origin of Covid-19*. Ridley is a Conservative hereditary peer in the UK’s House of Lords. Chan is a scientist at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard in Cambridge, MA, USA. They believe that the discovery of a grant application to support coronavirus experiments at the Wuhan Institute of Virology suggests “the strong possibility that scientific research, intended to avert a pandemic, instead started one”. Were those who believed that evidence was growing in favour of a lab leak now winning the argument? Was this really the end of the story? Of course not.

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