



Why US outsourced bat virus research to Wuhan

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Abstract

A U.S. NIH-funded \$3.7 million project was approved by Trump's Covid-19 advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci in 2015, after the Obama White House imposed a ban on 'monster-germ' research. In October 2014, the federal government declared a moratorium on gain-of-function research to weaponize viruses related to influenza, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). As a result, the research was outsourced to China's Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is currently at the center of scrutiny for the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Analysis

After a temporary détente between the US and China to put aside the blame game and cooperate to fight Covid-19, it seems conspiracy theories are once again flaring up and sabotaging joint efforts to control the pandemic.

The US National Institute of Health (NIH) funded bat coronavirus research in the Wuhan Institute of Virology to the tune of \$3.7 million, a recent article in the British newspaper *Daily Mail* revealed.¹

Back in October 2014, the US government had placed a federal moratorium on gain-of-function (GOF) research—altering natural pathogens to make them more deadly and infectious—as a result of rising fears about a possible pandemic caused by accidental or deliberate release of these genetically engineered monster germs.²

This was in part due to lab accidents at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in July 2014 that raised questions about biosafety at US high-containment labs.³

At that time, the CDC had closed two labs and halted some biological shipments in the wake of several incidents in which highly pathogenic microbes were mishandled by federal laboratories: an accidental shipment of live anthrax, the discovery of forgotten, live smallpox samples, and a newly revealed incident in which a dangerous influenza strain was accidentally shipped from CDC to another lab.

A CDC internal report described how scientists failed to follow proper procedures to ensure samples were inactivated before they left the lab, and also found “multiple other problems” with operating procedures in the anthrax lab.⁴

As such in October 2014, due to public health concerns the US government banned all federal funding on efforts to weaponize three viruses—influenza, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).⁵

In the face of a moratorium in the US, Dr. Anthony Fauci—director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID) and currently the leading doctor in the US Coronavirus Task Force—outsourced in 2015 the GOF research to China’s Wuhan lab and licensed the lab to continue receiving federal funding.⁶

The Wuhan lab is now at the center of scrutiny for possibly releasing the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus and causing the global Covid-19 pandemic.

¹ Glen Own, “Wuhan lab was performing coronavirus experiments on bats from the caves where the disease is believed to have originated - with a £3m grant from the US”, *Daily Mail*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8211257/Wuhan-lab-performing-experiments-bats-coronavirus-caves.html>

² Jocelyn Kaiser, David Malakoff, “U.S. halts funding for new risky virus studies, calls for voluntary moratorium”, *Science Magazine*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/10/us-halts-funding-new-risky-virus-studies-calls-voluntary-moratorium>

³ Jocelyn Kaiser, “Lab incidents lead to safety crackdown at CDC”, *Science Magazine*, July 11, 2014, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/07/lab-incidents-lead-safety-crackdown-cdc>; Christina Lin, “Biosecurity in question at U.S. germ labs”, *Asia Times*, April 6, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/04/biosecurity-in-question-at-us-germ-labs/>

⁴ U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “CDC Director Releases After-Action Report on Recent Anthrax Incident; Highlights Steps to Improve Laboratory Quality and Safety”, *CDC Press Release*, July 11, 2014, <https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2014/p0711-lab-safety.html>

⁵ U.S. Public Health Emergency, “U.S. Government Gain-of-Function Deliberative Process and Research Funding Pause on Selected Gain-of-Function Research Involving Influenza, MERS, and SARS Viruses” October 17, 2014, <http://www.phe.gov/s3/dualuse/Documents/gain-of-function.pdf>

⁶ Patrick Howley, “Fauci’s NIAID Funded Wuhan Lab Scientists To Research Bat Coronavirus”, *National File*, April 13, 2020, <https://nationalfile.com/faucis-niaid-funded-wuhan-lab-scientists-to-research-bat-coronavirus/>; C-SPAN, “U.S. 2015 Grant to Wuhan Lab question”, April 18, 2020, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4869590/user-clip-us-2015-grant-wuhan-lab-question>; Charles Crietz, “Gaetz calls for end to NIH grant to Wuhan virology lab, says it can be done with ‘stroke of a pen’”, *Fox News*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/gaetz-end-nih-grant-wuhan-virology-lab>



Understandably, China's lab would likely struggle with safety issues given the fact US labs also share similar problems, and indeed in January 2018 the US embassy in Beijing sent cables warning about safety of the Wuhan lab and asked for help.⁷

Additionally, the cable warned the researchers "showed that various SARS-like coronaviruses can interact with ACE2, the human receptor identified for SARS-coronavirus," meaning bat coronaviruses can be transmitted to humans to cause SARS-like diseases.

Now, the US is up in arms to hold China accountable for the global coronavirus pandemic, filing class action lawsuits domestically, as well as building a coalition with allies internationally.⁸

Lawsuits have been filed within the US and the International Criminal Court that China used the virus as a bio-weapon, and other suits are underway at the International Court of Justice. GOP lawmakers such as Sen. Tom Cotton and Rep. Dan Crenshaw have also introduced legislation that would allow Americans to sue China in federal court over the death and economic damage wrought by the virus.⁹

US spy agencies are also investigating whether the virus originated in the Wuhan lab, and seeking evidence that is needed to support the bio WMD theory promoted by GOP lawmakers.

If evidence is found that Covid-19 is a biological weapon, some pundits such as *Fox News* host Lou Dobbs have called for the US to declare war on China.¹⁰

Nonetheless, it is unclear what the legal ramifications would be if the virus is indeed leaked from a Chinese lab, but from a research project that was outsourced and funded by the US government.

Also, if there is a government ban in 2014 on federal funding being used for GOF research, what are the federal compliance and ethical issues surrounding the fact that NIH still gave federal funding instead of private funding to the Wuhan lab to continue the experiments?

Moreover, could some strains of the coronavirus originate in US labs, given the fact the US government lifted the ban in December 2017 on GOF research without resolving lab safety issues?¹¹

⁷ Josh Rogin, "State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses", *Washington Post*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/state-department-cables-warned-safety-issues-wuhan-lab-studying-bat-coronaviruses/>

⁸ "Thousands sign up to U.S. class action to sue China over coronavirus", *MSN*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-xi/northamerica/northamerica-top-stories/thousands-sign-up-to-us-class-action-to-sue-china-over-coronavirus/ar-BB12Uqmp?li=BBJDXDP>; "World's superpowers join forces against China over coronavirus", April 20, 2020, <https://iharare.com/worlds-superpowers-join-forces-against-china/>

⁹ Kevin Krause, "Lawsuit in Dallas federal court accuses Chinese government of creating coronavirus as 'biological weapon'", *Dallas News*, March 18, 2020,

<https://www.dallasnews.com/news/public-health/2020/03/18/dallas-federal-lawsuit-accuses-chinese-government-of-creating-coronavirus-as-biological-weapon/>; Joseph Young, "Bombshell ICC Complaint Sues China Over Alleged Coronavirus 'Bioweapon'", *CCN*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.ccn.com/bombshell-icc-complaint-sues-china-over-alleged-coronavirus-bioweapon/>; Yaron Steinbuch, "Lawmakers introduce bill that would let Americans sue China over 'Wuhan Virus'", *New York Post*, April 17, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/04/17/lawmakers-introduce-bill-allowing-americans-to-sue-china-over-coronavirus/>

¹⁰ Jerry Dunleavy, "Creating an accurate picture: US spy agencies investigating Wuhan lab escape coronavirus theory", *Washington Examiner*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/creating-an-accurate-picture-us-spy-agencies-investigating-wuhan-lab-escape-coronavirus-theory>; Daragh Roche, "Fox's Lou Dobbs Mulls War with China if Coronavirus Is 'A Biological Weapon'", *Politics USA*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.politicususa.com/2020/04/17/foxs-lou-dobbs-mulls-war-with-china-if-coronavirus-is-a-biological-weapon.html>

; Amelia Mayvis Christnot, "Fox Business Host Lou Dobbs Thinks The U.S. Should Go To War With China As A Consequence Of The Pandemic", April 20, 2020, <https://www.comicsands.com/china-conspiracy-theory-dobbs-fox-2645759264.html>

¹¹ Sara Reardon, "US government lifts ban on risky pathogen research", *Nature*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-017-08837-7>



For now, the Trump administration is investigating the \$3.7 million taxpayer money that went to the Wuhan lab, while Republican lawmaker Matt Gaetz called for an immediate end to NIH funding of Chinese research.¹² Since the federal ban on GOF research has been lifted, US labs can continue creating these monster germs domestically and would no longer need to outsource to China.

Nonetheless, there still needs to be better oversight on the dangerous experiments and regulations over biosecurity of labs. Currently, the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB)—a US government interagency panel that advises the NIH's parent, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), conducts risk assessment of GOF experiments that pose a significant threat to public health.¹³

NSABB has given HHS a framework to assess proposed research that would create pathogens with pandemic potential, such as research on genetically altering a virus to infect more species, or recreating a pathogen that has been eradicated in the wild, such as smallpox.

However, vaccine development and epidemiological surveillance do not automatically trigger the HHS review. In the post-mortem of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is likely a dangerous loophole that could be exploited with no oversight, and should probably be brought under HHS review in order to better protect public health in the future.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *Asia Times* on April 22, 2020.

¹² Shubhangi Shah, "Trump discusses Obama's \$3.7 mln grant as Wuhan virology lab comes under intense scrutiny", *International Business Times*, April 18, 2020,

<https://www.ibtimes.sg/trump-discusses-obamas-3-7-mln-grant-wuhan-virology-lab-comes-under-intense-scrutiny-videos-43261>

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¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Science_Advisory_Board_for_Biosecurity

