

Lab leak: The official conspiracy theory that still gets credit

written by Ari Paul, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting

April 23, 2025



For a while it seemed like the [dubious hypothesis](#) that the virus that causes Covid did not jump from animals to humans, but was released from a Chinese lab, might be

fading away. But the U.S. government and the media are breathing new life into this [zombie idea](#), contributing to the vilification of China and undermining actual scientific research.

In a **Wall Street Journal** op-ed ([4/15/25](#)), former Republican Rep. Mike Gallagher, who previously headed the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, asserted that “Wuhan lab’s risky gain-of-function research was a giant mistake that cost millions of lives.” He offered as evidence that “Western intelligence agencies” who “initially bowed to political pressure and rejected the theory that Covid emerged from the Wuhan lab...now favor that view, and most Americans agree.”

The op-ed called not for a massive overhaul of scientific research into stopping the next pandemic, but for a domestic and international hunt for those responsible for such treachery, because the “Chinese Communist Party was permitted to bleach the crime scene.” Gallagher said:

Mr. Trump should establish a multination tribunal, akin to the International Criminal Court but with actual teeth, to investigate the origins of the virus, examining evidence of negligence or intentional misconduct, and determining the culpability of key people and institutions.

‘Finally comes clean’

Gallagher isn’t alone when it comes to media outlets reheating the lab leak furor. **New York Times** contributing writer Zeynep Tufekci ([3/16/25](#)) stressed that “there is no strong scientific evidence ruling out a lab leak or proving that the virus arose from human-animal contact in that seafood market.” Her main evidence that the virus might have originated in a lab leak was the assessment of various intelligence agencies (mostly U.S., one German).

Tufekci (**New York Times**, [11/27/24](#)) had previously praised President Donald Trump's appointment of Stanford health economist Jay Bhattacharya to lead the National Institutes of Health, despite "making catastrophically wrong predictions" about the deadliness of Covid, because he "has criticized those who would silence critics of the public health establishment on a variety of topics, like the plausibility of a coronavirus lab leak."

Tufekci's recent column was gleefully received by right-wing media. The **New York Post** ([3/17/25](#)) said the **Times** "finally ran a column by a scientist who said the public was 'badly misled' about the origins of Covid-19—triggering backlash from readers who say the admission comes five years too late." It said that Tufekci—who is a sociology professor at Princeton University, and not a medical researcher, as the **Post** implies—"argued that officials and scientists hid facts, misled a **Times** journalist and colluded on campaigns to bury the possibility of a research lab leak in Wuhan, China."

The British conservative magazine **Spectator** ([3/18/25](#)) reported on Tufekci's piece with the headline "The **New York Times** Finally Comes Clean About Covid." The subhead: "It only took the newspaper five years to acknowledge what people had said since the beginning." Another right-wing British outlet, **UnHerd** ([3/17/25](#)), also used Tufekci's column as fodder for a "we told you so" piece.

It's not true that Tufekci is the first at the **Times** to advance the lab leak hypothesis. The **Times'** [David Leonhardt](#) promoted the concept in his widely read **Morning Newsletter** ([5/27/21](#)) only about a year after the U.S. went into shutdown mode. "Both animal-to-human transmission and the lab leak appear plausible," Leonhardt wrote. "And the obfuscation by Chinese officials means we may never know the truth."

Molecular biologist Alina Chan was more definitive in a **New York Times** op-ed ([6/3/24](#)) published last year, headlined "Why the Pandemic Probably Started in a

Lab, in Five Key Points.” Chan wrote that “a growing volume of evidence...suggests that the pandemic most likely occurred because a virus escaped from a research lab in Wuhan, China.” The essay “recapitulates the misrepresentation, selective quotation and faulty logic that has characterized so much of the pro—lab leak side of the Covid origin discourse,” FAIR’s Phillip Hosang ([7/3/24](#)) wrote in response.

Government talking points

In another FAIR piece ([4/7/23](#)) about corporate media pushing lab leak speculation, Joshua Cho and I noted that news and opinion pieces often cited intelligence agencies to bolster the credibility of their lab leak claims. “Readers should be asking why so many in media find government talking points on a scientific question so newsworthy,” we wrote, noting that “there is a vast amount of scientific research that points to Covid spreading to humans from other animal hosts.”

Less than two years later, as Trump prepared for his second inauguration, the federal government reintroduced the specter of “lab leak” when the Republican-led House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic released a report that offered “no new direct evidence of a lab leak,” but instead, according to **Science** ([12/3/24](#)), offered

a circumstantial case, including that the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) used NIAID money to conduct “gain-of-function” studies that modified distantly related coronaviruses.

The magazine also reported that “Democrats on the panel [released their own report](#) challenging many of their colleagues’ conclusions about Covid-19 origins.” The minority report noted “that the viruses studied at WIV with EcoHealth funding were too distantly related to SARS-CoV-2 to cause the pandemic.”

The following month, the CIA “offered a new assessment on the origin of the Covid outbreak, saying the coronavirus is ‘more likely’ to have leaked from a Chinese lab than to have come from animals” (**BBC**, [1/25/25](#)). As **AP** ([1/26/25](#)) noted, however, the “spy agency has ‘low confidence’ in its own conclusion.” **Reuters** ([3/12/25](#)) subsequently reported, citing “a joint report” by two German outlets, **Die Zeit** and **Sueddeutscher Zeitung**, that

Germany’s foreign intelligence service in 2020 put at 80%-90% the likelihood that the coronavirus behind the Covid-19 pandemic was accidentally released from China’s Wuhan Institute of Virology.

‘Unfounded assertions are dangerous’

Once again, the claims about the pandemics origin being a Chinese lab leak seem to come from Western spooks and anti-Communist zealots, not actual scientists. Yet Gallagher and Tufekci present these governmental declarations, sometimes from the [same agencies](#) that brought us the Iraqi WMD hoax, as compelling evidence, seemingly more authoritative than the researchers in relevant fields who point to a zoonotic jump as Covid’s most likely source.

The **Journal of Virology** ([8/1/24](#)) noted that the “preponderance of scientific evidence indicates a natural origin for SARS-CoV-2.” Nevertheless, the journal reported, “the theory that SARS-CoV-2 was engineered in and escaped from a lab dominates media attention, even in the absence of strong evidence.” The immunobiologists and other scientists who wrote the essay spelled out the danger of “lab leak” myth:

Despite the absence of evidence for the escape of the virus from a lab, the lab leak hypothesis receives persistent attention in the media, often without acknowledgment of the more solid evidence supporting zoonotic emergence. This

discourse has inappropriately led a large portion of the [general public to believe](#) that a pandemic virus arose from a Chinese lab. These unfounded assertions are dangerous...[as] they place unfounded blame and responsibility on individual scientists, which drives threats and attacks on virologists. It also stokes the flames of an anti-science, conspiracy-driven agenda, which targets science and scientists even beyond those investigating the origins of SARS-CoV-2. The inevitable outcome is an undermining of the broader missions of science and public health and the misdirecting of resources and effort. The consequence is to leave the world more vulnerable to future pandemics, as well as current infectious disease threats.

It is hard to believe that the world's scientists have conspired to create research suggesting zoonotic jump (**Globe and Mail**, [7/28/22](#); **Science**, [10/10/22](#); **PNAS**, [11/10/22](#); **Scientific American**, [3/17/23](#); **Nature**, [12/6/24](#)) for the sole purpose of covering up a lab leak. The **Times** and **Journal**'s unquestioning acceptance of the lab leak hypothesis endorses it as the expense of scientific research that says otherwise, and assumes that China's government is guilty until proven innocent.

More importantly, the goal of reviving the lab leak idea seems completely divorced from preparing for the next pandemic or protecting public health. If anything, the Trump administration is making it more difficult for scientists to guard against future viral dangers, given its many cuts to scientific and medical research (**All Things Considered**, [2/10/25](#); **STAT**, [4/1/25](#); **Scientific American**, [4/11/25](#)).

Recent articles giving credence to the lab leak hypothesis serve the Trump administration's mission of reducing medical research and protections for public health, and have the side benefit for MAGA of stirring up nationalist rage against China. It's harder to understand what people genuinely interested in protecting humanity from the next pandemic get from listening to intelligence agencies rather

than scientists.

Source: [Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting](#)

