

## About bats and COVID: Why the Wuhan ‘lab leak’ theory shouldn’t be dismissed out of hand, and other reflections one year into the crisis

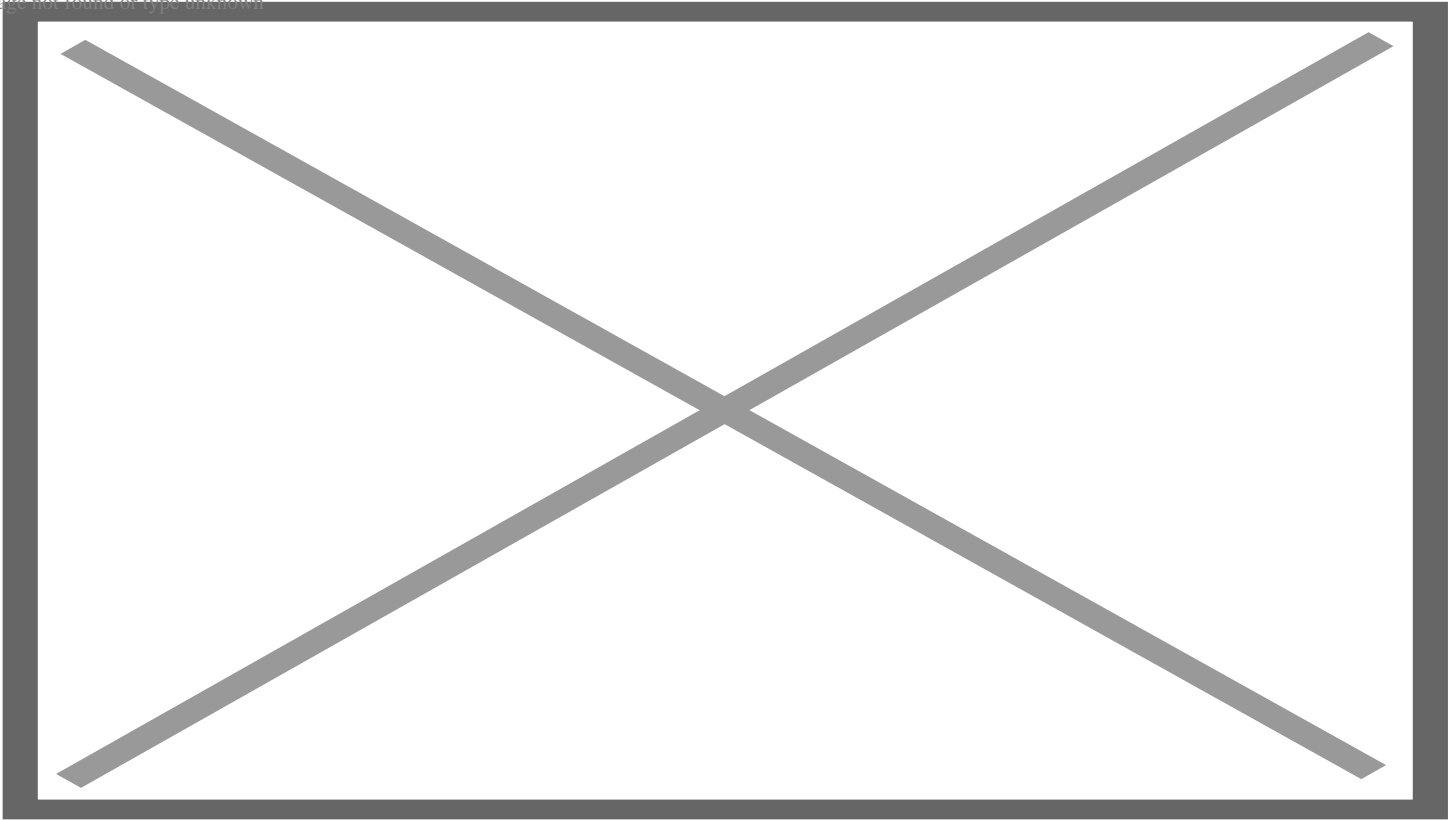
Winston Churchill famously observed that in wartime the truth must be surrounded by a bodyguard of lies. Many of my own long and most controversial articles have followed a somewhat analogous presentation, with the opening sections that sometimes run hundreds of words or longer often being rather innocuous or even somewhat off-topic. These are intended to serve as a bland or sugar-coated introduction to the far more dangerous material that then follows, which might otherwise tend to alarm and deter the casual reader if introduced too quickly.

Although I think this approach has its benefits, there are disadvantages as well. An unknown number of casual or busy readers may abandon the piece at that early stage, finding it too uninteresting to continue through to the more explosive elements. So there is probably value in extracting and highlighting some of the latter for a different sort of audience, and this may be especially true with regard to the current Covid-19 outbreak in America, which recently marked its first anniversary.

Almost exactly one year ago on March 16th, 2020, the local public health officers of the San Francisco Bay region, including Dr. Sarah Cody of my own Santa Clara County, [suddenly imposed a sweeping lockdown order](#) upon their nearly seven million residents, a government action unprecedented in American history. At that point, our country had suffered perhaps a dozen recorded deaths, and relatively little public attention had been focused on the growing danger. But experts believed that the virus was rapidly and invisibly spreading, and this dramatic Bay Area decision was quickly copied elsewhere, first in Los Angeles, then throughout the entire state of California, and soon afterward in other large states such as New York and Illinois. A temporary lockdown of three weeks was gradually extended to several months, with masking and social-distancing suddenly becoming a major part of everyday life throughout much of our country.

Not long afterward, federal health officials released a shocking warning that the new disease might eventually claim [as many as 100,000 to 240,000 American lives](#). For over a century, nothing like that had ever happened in our country and with existing deaths still merely numbering in the dozens, these gigantic “worst case” estimates were ridiculed by various ideological camps and disbelieving individuals as absurdly inflated and alarmist. Yet today the official Covid-19 death toll stands at around 550,000, a figure more than twice as high as the upper bound of that supposedly exaggerated projection.

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From the very beginning, “Covid Skeptics” have fiercely disputed such official totals. They have noted the considerable confusion between “dying from Covid-19” and “dying with Covid-19,” plausibly arguing that such postmortem diagnoses are often ambiguous, with many deaths of infected individuals having primarily been due to other factors. But it also seems quite likely that many Covid-19 deaths may not have been officially recorded as such. Given such problems of both over-counting and under-counting, the most reliable metric would be the total number of “excess deaths,” those above and beyond the normal figure for a given period. But considering these much more solid estimates for the actual death toll suffered during our current epidemic actually reveals a picture far worse than those official numbers.

Two months ago a large team of nearly a dozen *Wall Street Journal* reporters published a 2,000 word article entitled [“The Covid-19 Death Toll Is Even Worse Than It Looks”](#) which carefully analyzed the worldwide losses, finding that the CDC figures for total deaths during the first 11 months of 2020 suggested some grim conclusions:

In the U.S. alone, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data show more than 475,000 excess deaths through early December, a time frame that also included about 281,000 deaths linked to Covid-19, according to Johns Hopkins University.

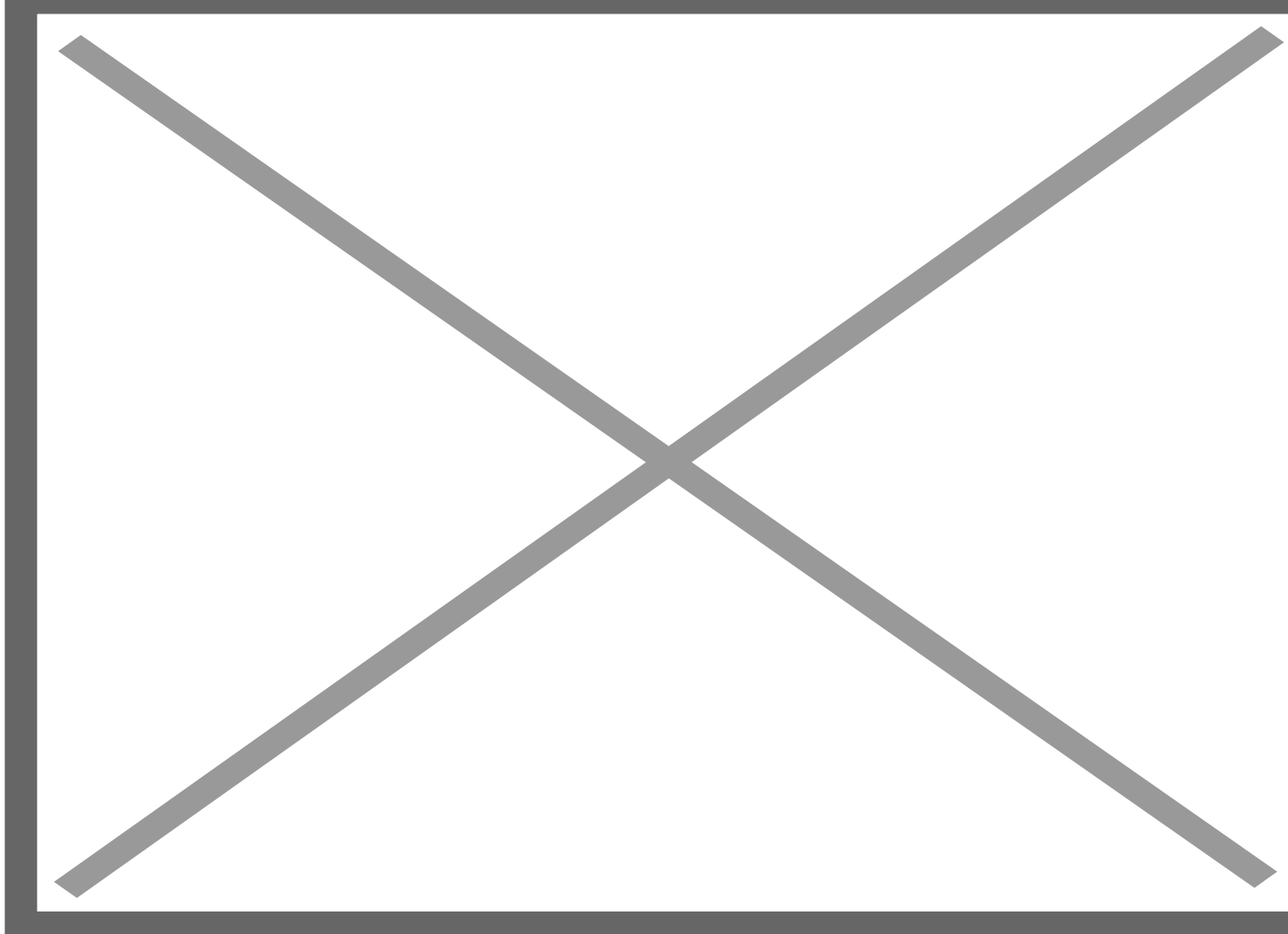
The pandemic led U.S. deaths to climb at least 10% last year. Typically U.S. deaths grow about 1.6% a year as the population grows and ages.

Since that date, our official count of Covid-19 fatalities has nearly doubled, so if the same ratio of “excess” deaths has remained unchanged, well over 900,000 Americans have now died as a consequence of the epidemic. I have seen other estimates that are significantly lower, but even these still indicate that we have suffered nearly 800,000 additional deaths during the first twelve months of the disease outbreak, amounting to the greatest loss of life in American national history, far surpassing the combined total of all our foreign wars, and even exceeding the four bloody years of our Civil War, though admittedly relative to a much larger population base.

Moreover, the sluggish implementation of our national vaccination program ensures that these totals will continue to climb throughout much of the remaining year and are almost certain to break the million mark. Last spring, predictions that more than a million Americans would die despite our unprecedented disease control efforts might have been dismissed as total lunacy, but such numbers are now on the verge of becoming our actual reality. We should hardly be surprised that the CDC has estimated that [by mid-2020 American life-expectancies had already dropped by a full year](#), their greatest decline since World War II.

A leading data website provides [a convenient graph](#) of the monthly mortality figures:

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Credit: Our World in Data

The public health measures implemented to control this severe epidemic have remained controversial in various political quarters, and I have become somewhat agnostic regarding the relative impact of the different policies such as lockdowns, masking, and social-distancing. Indeed, [a very long and comprehensive recent analysis](#) argues that lockdowns—at least the rather intermittent and half-hearted ones used throughout the West—have had little impact upon ultimate deaths. But it seems almost undeniable that without some combination of these various approaches, our national death toll would have been far worse.

I am equally ignorant of the competing merits of the different types of vaccines that have been rushed into production to control the illness, but without such vaccines, the bulk of our entire population would surely become infected over the next year or more. Although the impact of the disease is very sharply age-skewed—with the death rate of those over 60 being more than a hundred times higher than those under 40—the overwhelming majority of studies have indicated [an average community fatality rate of around 0.5% to 1.0%](#). So simple arithmetic indicates the vast human consequences of achieving unvaccinated

“herd immunity” in our population of 330 million.

Even leaving aside our huge American death toll, the social and economic consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak have been enormous, certainly constituting the most momentous event in our national history since the Great Depression or World War II, perhaps even since the Civil War. We are likely living through one of those massive “discontinuities” that will eventually divide one section of a thick American history textbook from the next. And the impact upon many other countries around the world has been equally substantial.

## **What did the Chinese know and when did they know it?**

According to the widely accepted conventional narrative, the original Covid-19 outbreak began during late 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan. Given the catastrophic consequences both for America and the entire world, our leading media organs and their teams of investigative journalists have naturally made every effort over the last year to establish the exact chronology of those crucial early days, also prompted by the sometimes reckless accusations of the Trump Administration and its political allies. As I previously wrote in April 2020:

For obvious reasons, the Trump Administration has become very eager to emphasize the early missteps and delays in the Chinese reaction to the viral outbreak in Wuhan, and has presumably encouraged our media outlets to direct their focus in that direction.

As an example of this, the Associated Press Investigative Unit recently published a rather detailed analysis of those early events purportedly based upon confidential Chinese documents. Provocatively entitled [“China Didn’t Warn Public of Likely Pandemic for 6 Key Days”](#), the piece was widely distributed, running in abridged form in the *NYT* and elsewhere. According to this reconstruction, the Chinese government first became aware of the seriousness of this public health crisis on Jan. 14th, but delayed taking any major action until Jan. 20th, a period of time during which the number of infections greatly multiplied.

Last month, a team of five *WSJ* reporters produced a very detailed and thorough [4,400 word analysis](#) of the same period, and the *NYT* has published [a helpful timeline](#) of those early events as well. Although there may be some differences of emphasis or minor disagreements, all these American media sources agree that Chinese officials first became aware of the serious viral outbreak in Wuhan in early to mid-January, with the first known death occurring on Jan. 11th, and finally implemented major new public health measures later that same month. No one has apparently disputed these basic facts.

The *WSJ* continued to devote considerable investigative resources to this same issue, and in August 2020, a team of several journalists published a further report focusing upon these same developments in China, [which I summarized soon afterward](#):

Numerous publications have documented America's severe mistakes in combating the disease, but [this 4,500 word WSJ report](#) focused upon the serious mishandling of the original outbreak by Chinese authorities.

The article revealed that top public health officials at China's Center for Disease Control only became aware of the situation on December 30th, when they learned that at least 25 suspected cases of a mysterious illness had already occurred in Wuhan during that month. But as the writers noted, the outbreak had certainly begun somewhat earlier:

"Even a fully empowered China CDC would likely have missed the very first cases of the coronavirus, which probably began spreading around Wuhan in October or November, most likely in people who never showed symptoms, or did but never saw a doctor, researchers say."

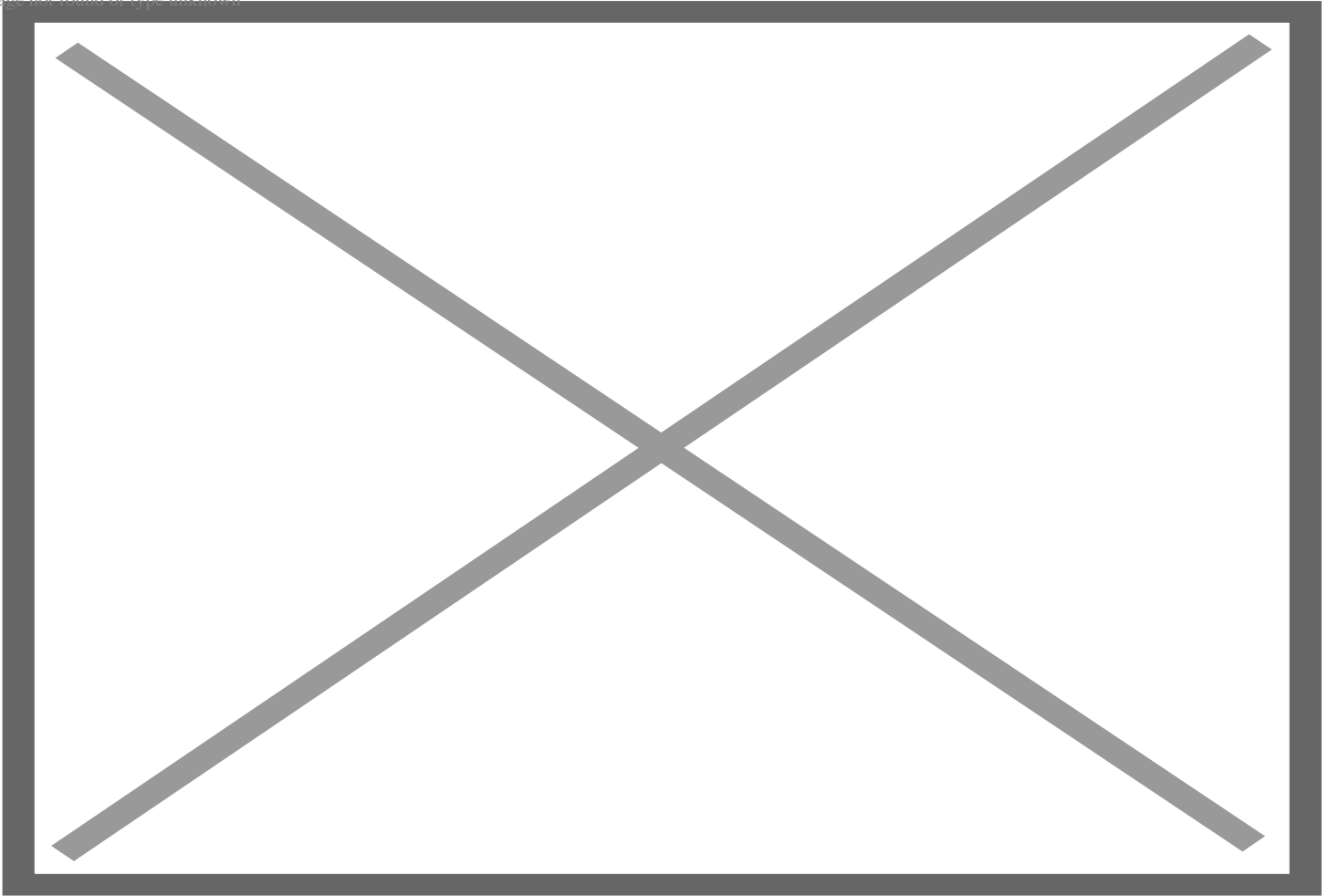
But the most detailed and exhaustive analysis of the circumstances of the Wuhan outbreak appeared outside the traditional media, published last August and September in *Quillette*, a well-regarded independent webzine. The author was Philippe Lemoine, a Cornell graduate student originally from France, and his remarkable four-part 31,000 word analysis remains the definitive work on the subject:

[su\_panel color="#3A3A3A" border="1px solid #3A3A3A" radius="2" text\_align="left"]**Philippe Lemoine • Quillette • August 24-September 6, 2020 • 31,000 Words**

- [The China Syndrome Part I: Outbreak](#)
- [The China Syndrome Part II: Transmission and Response](#)
- [The China Syndrome Part III: Wet Markets and BioLabs](#)
- [The China Syndrome Part IV: Did China Fudge its Data?](#)

The first two parts of Lemoine's series exhaustively analyzed the widespread claims by the Trump Administration and its political allies that China had somehow attempted to "cover up" the initial viral outbreak in Wuhan, or unreasonably delayed reporting the crucial facts to the outside world. He seems to scrupulously follow proper scholarly methods, carefully evaluating the often conflicting sources and applying a good deal of logic and common sense. In some cases he draws clear conclusions, though more often he correctly settles for reasonable likelihoods rather than anything stronger. But the ultimate result of the investigation was his total demolition of the case made against China on these particular grounds.

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Obviously, there were some inevitable delays in discovering and responding to the sudden outbreak of an entirely unknown and unsuspected viral disease, including serious bureaucratic missteps or political failures; but the same had been equally true of the American government's reaction to our own Swine Flu epidemic back in 2009. He also notes that the American CDC has a financial budget 150 times larger than its Chinese counterpart, and a per capita staff 25 times greater; yet the subsequent American delays and errors in detecting and containing our own Covid-19 outbreak were far worse, despite our many weeks of advance warning.

Based upon these results there seems not the slightest legitimate grounds for our sharp criticism of China regarding its promptness in alerting the world to the new and dangerous disease that had erupted in one of its largest cities. The exhaustive subsequent research by Lemoine, the *WSJ*, and others has fully confirmed [my original April 2020 verdict](#):

Then on Jan. 23rd and after only 17 deaths, the Chinese government took the astonishing step of locking down and quarantining the entire 11 million inhabitants of the city of Wuhan, a story that drew worldwide attention. They soon extended this policy to the 60 million Chinese of

Hubei province, and not longer afterward shut down their entire national economy and confined 700 million Chinese to their homes, a public health measure probably a thousand times larger than anything previously undertaken in human history. So either China's leadership had suddenly gone insane, or they regarded this new virus as an absolutely deadly national threat, one that needed to be controlled at any possible cost.

Given these dramatic Chinese actions and the international headlines that they generated, the current accusations by Trump Administration officials that China had attempted to minimize or conceal the serious nature of the disease outbreak are so ludicrous as to defy rationality. In any event, the record shows that on December 31st, the Chinese had already alerted the World Health Organization to the strange new illness, and Chinese scientists published the entire genome of the virus on Jan. 12th, allowing diagnostic tests to be produced worldwide.

## **Accusations of a Chinese lab leak**

The claims that the Chinese had failed to warn the world in timely fashion of the deadly new threat became ubiquitous in American-influenced media, but the weakness of such blatant falsehoods soon led Trump partisans to begin promoting far more shocking claims. As [I wrote last year](#):

I do not think these particular facts are much disputed except among the most blinkered partisans, and the Trump Administration probably recognizes the hopelessness of arguing otherwise. This may explain its recent shift towards a far more explosive and controversial narrative, namely claiming that Covid-19 may have been the product of Chinese research into deadly viruses at a Wuhan laboratory, which suggests that the blood of hundreds of thousands or millions of victims around the world will be on Chinese hands. Dramatic accusations backed by overwhelming international media power may deeply resonate across the globe.

News reports appearing in the [Wall Street Journal](#) and the *New York Times* have been reasonably consistent. Senior Trump Administration officials have pointed to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a leading Chinese biolab, as the possible source of the infection, with the deadly virus having been accidentally released, subsequently spreading first throughout China and later worldwide. Trump himself has publicly voiced similar suspicions, as did Secretary of State and former CIA Director Mike Pompeo in a [FoxNews interview](#). Private lawsuits against China in the multi-trillion-dollar range have already [been filed](#) by rightwing activists and Republican senators Tom Cotton and Lindsey Graham have raised similar governmental demands.

Within a few weeks, these claims had already become [strongly embedded](#) within American public opinion:

According to a poll taken at the end of April, [a remarkable 45% of Americans](#) believed that the deadly virus had “probably” or “definitely” originated in such a laboratory, with 74% of



Republicans having that belief.

Although soon pushed aside by more recent domestic political controversies, the Wuhan Lab Leak Hypothesis has hardly disappeared from prominent public discussion. Just a few days ago, the top of the *Wall Street Journal* opinion page carried a piece by its leading business columnist, Holman W. Jenkins, Jr., entitled [“Wuhan Lab Theory a Dark Cloud on China,”](#) once again restating these widespread suspicions. A day earlier, a *Washington Post* columnist named Josh Rogin had [decided to revive his previous allegations](#) along similar lines.

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Leading American media outlets had promoted these theories last year by citing government intelligence sources. In an interview, Trump himself had fingered the Wuhan lab as the source of the virus, a conclusion which Pompeo immediately claimed was supported by “enormous evidence.” Yet absolutely no such evidence was ever provided.

Indeed, oddly enough, these exact sorts of accusations had begun widely circulating in social media and corners of the Internet as early as January, beginning almost as soon as the new epidemic in Wuhan became a major source of world attention. These claims were afterward picked up and regurgitated by American outlets and pundits hostile to China, but over a full year later no substantial evidence has ever been presented. Thus, the most recent *WSJ* column relied merely upon innuendo and statements of suspicion without citing a single fact, an astonishing basis for such monumental accusations of Chinese culpability in more than 2.5 million worldwide deaths.

The obvious reason for such circumspection is that the actual case is extremely weak, almost non-existent. The [third part of Lemoine's Quillette series](#), appearing last September and running 8,000 words, almost completely demolished the purported evidence. As [I wrote a week later](#):

In reading this analysis I was repeatedly struck by the extremely flimsy nature of the evidence being used to indict China. One of the most widely cited theories implicating the Wuhan lab was apparently based upon nothing more than unsubstantiated social media rumors, while a major article in *National Review* doctored its central quotes by leaving out sentences that completely changed their meaning. In recent years our media has fiercely ridiculed those lunatic conspiracy-mongers who claim that most of our mass-shootings have been media hoaxes perpetrated by “crisis actors” or that “nobody died at Sandy Hook.” But much of the main evidence pointing to Chinese culpability for the worldwide Covid-19 disaster appears just as vacuous.

## **Pro-Chinese counter-propaganda**

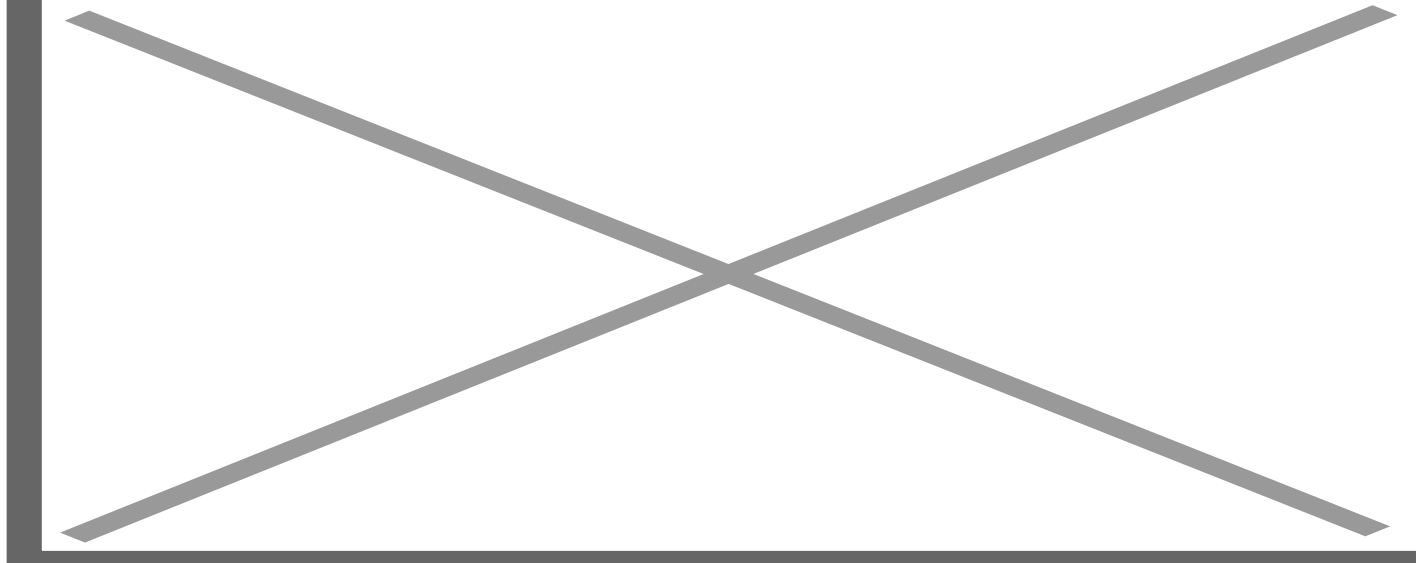
However, absence of evidence does not constitute evidence of absence, and although there seems virtually no solid evidence for a Wuhan lab leak being the source of the epidemic, the scientific facility did specialize in bat viruses closely related to Covid-19, which has naturally raised reasonable suspicions even in the fair-minded. Lemoine may have effectively debunked a considerable assortment of extremely weak or even fraudulent claims, but this hardly disproves the controversial hypothesis.

Under these circumstances, we should not be surprised that China's own committed partisans soon began promoting their own theories and counter-narratives, intended to firmly close the door to those Wuhan lab accusations. But in most cases, the arguments they advanced were even weaker or more ludicrous than those of their anti-China opponents, perhaps underscoring the generally poor quality of pro-Chinese propaganda.

One of the most widespread of these theories, which had begun circulating on the Internet by early March, was the suggestion that the Covid-19 virus had its origins outside of China, and [had actually been present in the U.S. during much of 2019](#); the disease was then accidentally brought to Wuhan by American

visitors, thereby producing the Chinese outbreak. Since anti-China accusations had pointed to the Wuhan lab as the likely source of the virus, China's partisans often returned the favor, [suggesting that the deadly infection had somehow escaped from Ft. Detrick](#), America's premier biowarfare research facility. During summer 2019 America had seen a flurry of news stories about "vaping deaths" and [these were cited](#) as misdiagnosed Covid-19 fatalities, while Ft. Detrick's temporary shutdown for a few months during the summer became proof of a laboratory leak.

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Tweet from Chinese diplomat Zhao Lijian.

However, this theory makes absolutely no logical sense. The single most crucial fact about Covid-19 is that the virus is extremely contagious under normal conditions, and once it has become established in a community, the number of infected individuals will tend to double every three to five days absent strong public health measures. Thus, the infection of a tiny handful of Americans in January or February had led to huge regional outbreaks by March and April, including many thousands of deaths, with [overburdened hospitals containing scenes out of Dante's \*Inferno\*](#). If any significant number of Americans had already become infected during late summer 2019, the gigantic resulting epidemic and huge death toll by the end of that year would have so dominated our news headlines that no one would have paid any attention to the international developments out of Wuhan.

Exactly the same argument applies to claims that a single wastewater sample revealed [traces of the virus in Barcelona during March 2019](#). Lab tests do occasionally produce false-positives, and since no further sample was detected in that city during the eight months that followed, a one-time testing error seems the most logical explanation.

There does exist much more credible wastewater evidence that [the virus was already present in Italy by December 2019 and that a Frenchman had also become infected by that date](#), somewhat earlier than previously had been believed. But the current assumption is that Patient Zero became infected in Wuhan during late October or early November, thereby providing a couple of months for the earliest virus carriers to have reached those other cities, which hardly seems impossible. And with the sole exception of that entirely anomalous March 2019 wastewater sample from Barcelona, there is no solid evidence of the virus

anywhere in the world prior to its original appearance in Wuhan.

As an extreme example of the sort of foolish speculation sometimes promoted on the Internet, a published study suggested that [fully 2% of California's entire population had already been infected by December 13, 2019](#). However, one of the authors [later admitted the testing method used may not have been reliable](#), and I certainly think that if 800,000 Californians had already been suffering from Covid-19 at such an early date, we surely would have noticed something.

Some advocates of these pro-China fringe theories have argued that the virus might originally have been harmless or only slightly contagious while it was circulating in America during 2019, and then later mutated into its currently dangerous form only after it had arrived in Wuhan; but this is obviously *ad hoc* reasoning. Anyway, with the sole exception of that one discordant Barcelona result, wastewater tests have failed to find any reliable traces of the virus anywhere in the world before the Wuhan outbreak.

## **Scientific claims and counter-claims**

Although circulation of such weak and contradictory attacks on the Wuhan Lab Leak Hypothesis have been confined to fringe outlets, highly reputable mainstream scientists have made more sweeping claims on the same issue, arguing that the structure of Covid-19 was clearly natural in origin, and not what would have been produced in a lab. For example, a [3,000 word article published in \*Nature\*](#), one of the world's premier scientific journals, [has been regularly cited](#) as debunking any artificial origin, with the five reputable co-authors lending weight to those claims. This analysis was initially released in mid-February and around that same time *The Lancet*, another highly authoritative publication, also carried [a public declaration](#) by 27 scientists taking a similar position while condemning the "conspiracy theories" suggesting a laboratory origin. However, the impact of that latter statement was considerably diminished once it became known that the main organizer, zoologist Peter Daszak, had himself long been closely associated with the Wuhan lab under suspicion, and indeed had [previously channeled American funding](#) toward its viral research.

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Perhaps these sweeping denials of any possible man-made origin are correct, and I lack the professional expertise in virology or microbiology to properly evaluate them. But scientists do live in the real world, and one might easily imagine that the wild charges of the Trump Administration—itsself hardly popular in academic circles—would have inspired various researchers to try to defuse the potentially dangerous looming international conflict by claiming that the virus was obviously natural, even if the actual evidence seemed much less clear-cut.

Meanwhile, the background of the leading scientific advocates taking the opposite side of this contentious issue raise even more serious suspicions. There exists a large body of work on the Internet claiming that the the virus displayed tell-tale evidence of artificial bioengineering, with particular signs pointing to the Wuhan lab as the creator. But apparently the bulk of this material is either based upon the work of an anonymous group of researchers calling themselves “Project Evidence” or that of a previously obscure biotech entrepreneur and part-time blogger. Lemoine carefully examined this evidence, found the case fairly weak, and laid out some reasonable objections to those theories.

Although I cannot properly weigh such conflicting claims, my strongest doubts fall in a completely different direction. As [I wrote at the time](#):

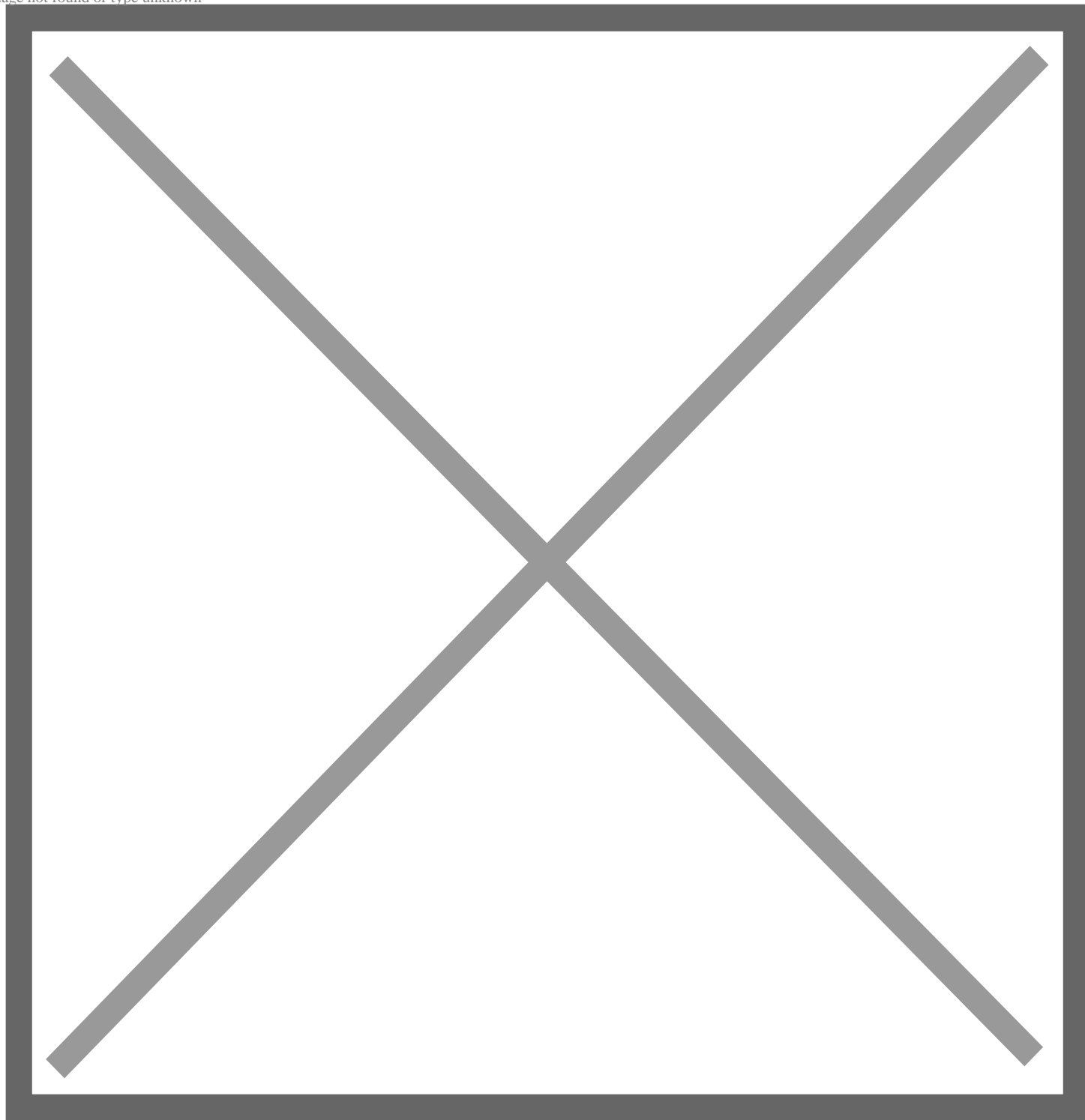
Lemoine seems a very cautious writer and he carefully avoids contaminating his important analysis by suggesting any bad faith or fraud in the work he is examining, but given the history of the last couple of decades we can hardly ignore that possibility. Our disastrous Iraq War was promoted by the knowingly-false claims of Saddam’s WMDs, and the equally farcical Russiagate Hoax has roiled American politics for more than three years. Governmental intelligence agencies have great resources and expertise in fabricating evidence and then effectively promoting their concoctions through their network of friendly journalists. We should hardly be surprised if such means had been employed to redirect the political blame for a multi-trillion-dollar global catastrophe.

When an entirely anonymous group of allegedly independent researchers devotes a great deal of time and effort to publishing a set of scientific findings on the Internet that so exactly match the aggressive propaganda accusations of an American president and his national security apparatus, huge suspicions seem warranted. Is this not exactly the sort of propaganda project that we would normally expect to be undertaken by our intelligence agencies, notably the CIA, which most recently had been led by Pompeo, the leading proponent of the Wuhan Lab Leak Hypothesis?

Or take the other main scientific source, an individual named Yuri Deigin, previously almost unknown to the world except through his occasional blogging in the unrelated field of gerontology. On April 22nd, just one week after Trump, Pompeo, and other top officials began making their dramatic charges, Deigin released [a massive 16,000 word article](#) on *Medium*, containing an ocean of colorful and very professionally-produced diagrams, charts, and graphs, making exactly the same case, but doing so in tremendous scientific detail. No other authors were listed, so we are required to assume that a single, independently-minded individual decided to put aside all his regular work and undertake such heroic efforts to investigate, write, and produce this enormous research report simply out of his disinterested concern regarding the true origins of the Covid-19 outbreak, which had only just become an important

issue for Americans the previous month.

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That indeed may be exactly what happened, but I have my doubts. I carefully read the entire Deigin document not long after it was released, and found it exceptionally impressive, many, many times longer and more comprehensive than the contrary article published by those five academic scholars in *Nature* the previous month. Deigin's analysis was so enormously detailed and exhaustive, one might at first



glance assume that it had been the product of months of dedicated effort by a large team of top professionals rather than just a hobbyist-type undertaking by a solitary part-time blogger; and I strongly suspect that the former possibility is the actual reality.

Science functions under the honor system, and a research paper should be judged on its own merits rather than dismissed if the authors happen to be anonymous or previously obscure individuals. But international intelligence agencies obviously operate under entirely different rules, and we must become very suspicious when astonishingly detailed research findings suddenly appear on the Internet that dovetail so exactly with the current goals of the CIA or its various counterparts. But if authors and their publishers already have strong established reputations to protect, we can assume that they would be far less likely to serve as the willing front-men for government-sponsored black propaganda and scientific disinformation.

Major political events are always competing for the transitory mind-share of the fickle American public. The massive urban political protests following the May 25th death of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody soon pushed aside the controversy over the Wuhan lab, and these were then followed by the national focus on Trump's heated presidential reelection campaign and the bitter conflict in the media over alleged voter fraud that produced an angrily disputed outcome. But on January 4th, the debate over the true origins of Covid-19 seemed about to be reignited by a major cover-story in *New York* magazine, only to be immediately swamped and forgotten in the wake of the Capitol Hill protests two days later and the resulting arrests and national crackdown so heavily covered by the media.

The author of that massive but largely ignored 12,000 word article entitled "[The Lab-Leak Hypothesis](#)" was Nicholson Baker, a prominent novelist and liberal public intellectual, hardly a Neocon or Trump supporter and quite unlikely to be acting as a front for American intelligence agencies. Although he did not possess professional expertise in the subject, he seemed a sincere and intelligent layman, which actually constituted a strength rather than a weakness. Instead of attempting to blind his readers with the science of a dizzyingly long collection of technical references, colorful charts, and complex graphs—which 99% of his audience would have been unable to easily interpret or verify—he instead straightforwardly reported the results of his discussions with a number of reputable academics, together with his own conclusions.

[su\_panel color="#3A3A3A" border="1px solid #3A3A3A" radius="2" text\_align="left"]**Nicholson Baker •  
New York Magazine • January 4, 2021 • 12,000 Words**

Image not found. [The Lab-Leak Hypothesis](#)

*For decades, scientists have been hot-wiring viruses in hopes of preventing a pandemic, not causing one. But what if ... ?*

very plausible one. Indeed, one of the earliest papers raising that possibility was released by a mainstream Chinese scientist only to be quickly removed under government pressure, and an early paper by a Taiwanese researcher took the same position and soon suffered the same fate. Several perfectly respectable American scientists held similar opinions, but as one of them explained, the reckless public accusations by Trump and Pompeo had rendered such ideas “toxic” in their academic circles. Baker may not have been a professional virologist or expert in biowarfare, but as the Covid-19 outbreak began he had just completed *Baseless*, a lengthy non-fictional account of American national security secrets, which appeared to glowing reviews in July 2020. One of his major elements was an account of America’s massive 1950s bioweapons research program, which had been accorded resources and importance matching that of our nuclear weapons efforts. Based upon his years of research, the author was not a complete neophyte on biological warfare issues and was also fully aware of our own long history of laboratory accidents, which had claimed a number of lives. So he was naturally alert to the possibility that a similar accident had occurred in Wuhan, which contained China’s most secure facility of that same type.

Baker seems scrupulously fair in his presentation, emphasizing that numerous other scientists have taken the entirely contrary position that the virus is most likely natural, while honest members of both rival camps acknowledged that neither case had been solidly established. But he himself strongly leaned towards an artificial origin, emphasizing the seemingly remarkable efficiency with which Covid-19 spreads itself and attacks the human body. He therefore believed that a lab leak was the most likely source, and his thoughtfully considered opinion cannot easily be dismissed.

## **Considering an American biowarfare attack**

The greatest weakness of Baker’s comprehensive analysis is not the controversial theory that he carefully examines, but the even more controversial possibility that he seems to totally ignore. At one point, he notes the remarkable characteristics of the pathogen, whose collection of features allowed it to so effectively target humans and which had first appeared in a city having one of the very few world laboratories engaged in exactly that type of viral research, closing his paragraph with the sentence “What are the odds?” But other, even more implausible coincidences were entirely excluded from his discussion, and the same had also been true for Lemoine.

Both these authors seem to assume that there exist only two possible scenarios: a natural virus that suddenly appeared in Wuhan during late 2019 or an accidental lab-leak of an enhanced disease agent in that same city. But there is an obvious third case as well, clearly suggested by Baker's focus on America's own very active biowarfare program, which he extensively discussed both in his long article and in his highly-regarded book. We must surely consider the possibility that the Covid-19 outbreak was not at all accidental, but instead constituted a deliberate attack against China, occurring as it did near the absolute height of the international tension with America, and therefore suggesting that elements of our own national security apparatus were the most obvious suspects. Given the realities of the publishing industry, any serious exploration of such a scenario would probably have precluded the appearance of the important Baker or Lemoine articles in any respectable publication, perhaps helping to explain such silence. But as I have argued in my long [American Pravda series](#), many historical accounts that were blacklisted for exactly those sorts of reasons appear quite likely to be true.

As [I had noted in my April article](#):

Although the coronavirus is only moderately lethal, apparently having a fatality rate of 1% or less, it is extremely contagious, including during an extended pre-symptomatic period and also among asymptomatic carriers. Thus, portions of the US and Europe are now suffering heavy casualties, while the policies adopted to control the spread have devastated their national economies. Although the virus is unlikely to kill more than a small sliver of our population, we have seen to our dismay how a major outbreak can so easily wreck our entire economic life.

During January, the journalists reporting on China's mushrooming health crisis regularly emphasized that the mysterious new viral outbreak had occurred at the worst possible place and time, appearing in the major transport hub of Wuhan just prior to the Lunar New Year holiday, when hundreds of millions of Chinese would normally travel to their distant family homes for the celebration, thereby potentially spreading the disease to all parts of the country and producing a permanent, uncontrollable epidemic. The Chinese government avoided that grim fate by the unprecedented decision to shut down its entire national economy and confine 700 million Chinese to their own homes for many weeks. But the outcome seems to have been a very near thing, and if Wuhan had remained open for just a few days longer, China might easily have suffered long-term economic and social devastation.

The timing of an accidental laboratory release would obviously be entirely random. Yet the outbreak seems to have begun during the precise period of time most likely to damage China, the worst possible ten-day or perhaps thirty-day window. As [I noted](#) in January, I saw no solid evidence that the coronavirus was a bioweapon, but if it were, the timing of the release seemed very unlikely to have been accidental.

Consider also the preceding waves of other unfortunate viral epidemics that had recently ravaged China:

[D]uring the previous two years, the Chinese economy had already suffered serious blows from other mysterious new diseases, although these had targeted farm animals rather than people. During 2018 a new Avian Flu virus had swept the country, eliminating large portions of

China's poultry industry, and during 2019 the Swine Flu viral epidemic had devastated China's pig farms, destroying 40% of the nation's primary domestic source of meat, with widespread claims that the latter disease was being spread by mysterious small drones. My morning newspapers had hardly ignored these important business stories, [noting](#) that the sudden collapse of much of China's domestic food production might prove a huge boon to American farm exports at the height of our trade conflict, but I had never considered the obvious implications. So for three years in a row, China had been severely impacted by strange new viral diseases, though only the most recent had been deadly to humans. This evidence was merely circumstantial, but the pattern seemed highly suspicious.

Another even more remarkable coincidence has received far greater distribution, becoming a staple of anti-American "conspiracy theories" and even resulting in a diplomatic incident involving the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

According to the widely accepted current chronology, the Covid-19 epidemic began in Wuhan during late October or early November of 2019. But the World Military Games were also held in Wuhan during that same period, ending in late October, with 300 American military servicemen attending. As I've repeatedly emphasized in [my articles and comments for more than a year](#), how would Americans react if 300 Chinese military officers had paid an extended visit to Chicago, and soon afterward a mysterious and deadly epidemic had suddenly erupted in that city?

It surely would have been very easy for our intelligence services to have slipped a couple of their operatives into that large American military contingent, and the presence of many thousands of foreign military personnel, traveling around the large city and doing sightseeing, would have been ideally suited to providing cover for the quiet release of a highly-infectious viral bioweapon. None of this constitutes proof, but the coincidental timing is quite remarkable.

This intriguing speculation was included in [a very long piece](#) by an obscure and eccentric American ex-pat living in China that we had republished on our website on February 14, 2020. By the end of January, we had already run a dozen articles and posts on the coronavirus outbreak, then added many more by the middle of February. These pieces totaled tens of thousands of words and provoked a half million additional words of comments, probably establishing our website as the primary English-language source for this particular perspective on the deadly epidemic, with this material eventually attracting many hundreds of thousands of pageviews. The particular article suggesting that the American visitors to Wuhan had unleashed the disease quickly became one of our most popular, with over 90,000 pageviews and 110,000 words of comments, and with much of the interest coming from within China itself. Then, one week later, leading Chinese government newspapers, such as [People's Daily](#) and [Global Times](#) began reporting the same story, citing growing speculation on Chinese social media sites. By mid-march, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman had [Tweeted out links to foreign articles making these same points](#), which received enormous attention, leading the Trump Administration to summon the Chinese ambassador and demand a formal apology.

This article is very much important to each and every one of us. Please read and retweet it.  
COVID-19: Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the US. <https://t.co/LPanlo40MR>

— Lijian Zhao ??? (@zlj517) [March 13, 2020](#)

This latter sequence of events is carefully recounted in [a massive 17,000 word, 54 page report](#) released a few weeks ago by DFRLab, a social media-oriented research unit within the establishmentarian Atlantic Council, with the work being based upon nine months of research and preparation by a dozen staffers, together with the Associated Press investigations team. The study seemed aimed at tracking the appearance and Internet dissemination of a wide range of supposedly false or unsubstantiated “conspiracy theories” regarding the Covid-19 outbreak, and [AP journalists soon publicized the results](#), denouncing “the superspreaders” of such allegedly spurious and potentially dangerous beliefs.

[su\_panel color="#3A3A3A" border="1px solid #3A3A3A" radius="2" text\_align="left"]**DFRLab/The Atlantic Council • February 2021 • 17,000 Words**

- [Weaponized: How Rumors About Covid-19's Origins Led to a Narrative Arms Race](#)[/su\_panel]

But while this project did produce a very useful compendium of the chronology and source references of the various unorthodox narratives surrounding the disease, many of which were certainly erroneous or implausible, few effective rebuttal arguments were provided, notably regarding the extremely suspicious timing of the American military presence in Wuhan. Blogger Steve Sailer and others have often ridiculed this “point-and-sputter” school of refutation, in which non-mainstream theories need only be described in order to be considered conclusively disproved.

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Although the Atlantic Council/Associated Press team certainly included numerous skilled social media researchers, journalists, and editors, there is no indication that any of these individuals possessed serious national security credentials, let alone specialized expertise in the arcane topic of biowarfare. This may help to explain why the weighty report which drew upon such enormous resources was almost entirely descriptive and made so little effort to analyze or evaluate the plausibility of the various conflicting “conspiracy narratives” that it treated at great length. By contrast, the very different perspective of someone apparently well-versed in the subject was initially confined to his informal comments left on an obscure corner of the Internet.

Biological warfare is a highly technical subject, and those possessing such expertise are unlikely to candidly report their classified research activities in the pages of our major newspapers, perhaps even less so after Prof. Lieber was dragged off to prison in chains. My own knowledge is nil. But in mid-March I came across several extremely long and detailed

comments on the coronavirus outbreak that had been posted on a small website by an individual calling himself “OldMicrobiologist” and who claimed to be a retired forty-year veteran of American biodefense. The style and details of his material struck me as quite credible, and after a little further investigation I concluded that there was a high likelihood his background was exactly as he had described. I made arrangements to republish his comments in the form of [a 3,400 word article](#), which soon attracted a great deal of traffic and 80,000 words of further comments.

Although the writer emphasized the lack of any hard evidence, he said that his experience led him to strongly suspect that the coronavirus outbreak was indeed an American biowarfare attack against China, probably carried out by agents brought into that country under cover of the Military Games held at Wuhan in late October, the sort of sabotage operation our intelligence agencies had sometimes undertaken elsewhere. One important point he made was that high lethality was often counter-productive in a bioweapon since debilitating or hospitalizing large numbers of individuals may impose far greater economic costs on a country than a biological agent which simply inflicts an equal number of deaths. In his words “a high communicability, low lethality disease is perfect for ruining an economy,” suggesting that the apparent characteristics of the coronavirus were close to optimal in this regard. Those so interested should read his analysis and assess for themselves his credibility and persuasiveness.

During January, American media outlets, including those under the authority of Secretary of State and former CIA Director Mike Pompeo, began focusing attention on the Wuhan lab as the potential source of the viral outbreak, while journalists disputing this narrative and attempting to raise other possibilities had serious difficulties even getting their articles published on alternative websites:

Scientific investigation of the coronavirus had already pointed to its origins in a bat virus, leading to widespread media speculation that bats sold as food in the Wuhan open markets had been the original disease vector. Meanwhile, the orchestrated waves of anti-China accusations had emphasized Chinese laboratory research on that same viral source. But we soon published [a lengthy article](#) by investigative journalist Whitney Webb providing copious evidence of America’s own enormous biowarfare research efforts, which had similarly focused for years on bat viruses. Webb was then associated with *MintPress News*, but that publication had strangely declined to publish her important piece, perhaps skittish about the grave suspicions it directed towards the US government on so momentous an issue. So without the benefit of our platform, her major contribution to the public debate might have attracted relatively little readership.

The extensive material collected by the Atlantic Council researchers lent further support to an important point [I had made last April](#) about the curious nature of the early Covid-19 coverage:

One intriguing aspect of the situation was that almost from the first moment that reports of the strange new epidemic in China reached the international media, a large and orchestrated campaign had been launched on numerous websites and Social Media platforms to identify the



cause as a Chinese bioweapon carelessly released in its own country. Meanwhile, the far more plausible hypothesis that China was the victim rather than the perpetrator had received virtually no organized support anywhere, and only began to take shape as I gradually located and republished relevant material, usually drawn from very obscure quarters and often anonymously authored. So it seemed that only the side hostile to China was waging an active information war. The outbreak of the disease and the nearly simultaneous launch of such a major propaganda campaign may not necessarily prove that an actual biowarfare attack had occurred, but I do think it tends to support such a theory.

## The smoking gun?

All the evidence thus far presented has merely been circumstantial, strongly establishing that elements of the American national security establishment had the means, motive, and opportunity to stage a biowarfare attack in Wuhan. However, in April additional facts appeared that some have characterized as “smoking gun” evidence of that disturbing scenario:

But with the horrific consequences of our own later governmental inaction being obvious, elements within our intelligence agencies have sought to demonstrate that they were not the ones asleep at the switch. Earlier this month, [an ABC News story](#) cited four separate government sources to reveal that as far back as late November, a special medical intelligence unit within our Defense Intelligence Agency had produced a report warning that an out-of-control disease epidemic was occurring in the Wuhan area of China, and widely distributed that document throughout the top ranks of our government, warning that steps should be taken to protect US forces based in Asia. After the story aired, a Pentagon spokesman officially denied the existence of that November report, while various other top level government and intelligence officials refused to comment. But a few days later, [Israeli television mentioned](#) that in November American intelligence had indeed shared such a report on the Wuhan disease outbreak with its NATO and Israeli allies, thus seeming to independently confirm the complete accuracy of the original ABC News story and its several government sources.

*It therefore appears that elements of the Defense Intelligence Agency were aware of the deadly viral outbreak in Wuhan more than a month before any officials in the Chinese government itself.* Unless our intelligence agencies have pioneered the technology of precognition, I think this may have happened for the same reason that arsonists have the earliest knowledge of future fires.

According to these multiply-sourced mainstream media accounts, by “the second week of November” our Defense Intelligence Agency was already preparing a secret report warning of a “cataclysmic” disease outbreak taking place in Wuhan. Yet at that point, probably no more than a couple of dozen individuals had been infected in that city of 11 million, with few of those yet having any serious symptoms. The implications are rather obvious. Furthermore:

As the coronavirus gradually began to spread beyond China's own borders, another development occurred that greatly multiplied my suspicions. Most of these early cases had occurred exactly where one might expect, among the East Asian countries bordering China. But by late February Iran had become the second epicenter of the global outbreak. Even more surprisingly, its political elites had been especially hard-hit, with [a full 10% of the entire Iranian parliament soon infected](#) and at least [a dozen of its officials and politicians](#) dying of the disease, including some who were [quite senior](#). Indeed, Neocon activists on Twitter began gleefully noting that their hatred Iranian enemies were now dropping like flies.

Let us consider the implications of these facts. Across the entire world the only political elites that have yet suffered any significant human losses have been those of Iran, and they died at a very early stage, before significant outbreaks had even occurred almost anywhere else in the world outside China. Thus, we have America assassinating Iran's top military commander on Jan. 2nd and then just a few weeks later large portions of the Iranian ruling elites became infected by a mysterious and deadly new virus, with many of them soon dying as a consequence. Could any rational individual possibly regard this as a mere coincidence?

I can easily understand why all these simple facts and their obvious implications regarding the likely origins of the worldwide epidemic might be considered extremely uncomfortable, perhaps too uncomfortable to be discussed in our media outlets, and therefore have been so widely ignored. Most of these crucial points were already presented in my original April 2020 article on the subject, which quickly began to attract enormous traffic and interest in social media. Yet just days after it ran, our entire website was suddenly banned from Facebook and all our web pages were deranked by Google, perhaps underscoring the very dangerous nature of this material, and the reasons why so few others have been willing to raise the same points.

But America now stands on the brink of recording a million "excess deaths" from this epidemic, so perhaps it has finally now become time to honestly explore the true reasons for our gigantic national calamity.

[su\_panel color="#3A3A3A" border="1px solid #3A3A3A" radius="2" text\_align="left"]**Ron Unz • *The Unz Review* • April 21, 2020 • 7,400 Words**

- [American Pravda: Our Coronavirus Catastrophe as Biowarfare Blowback?](#)[/su\_panel]

## **The hypothetical scenario of the Covid-19 outbreak**



Given the conclusions suggested above, I think it may be useful for me to provide my own summary of a plausible scenario for the Covid-19 outbreak. Although I had already presented this outline six months ago [in one of my previous articles](#), I see no need for any revisions. Obviously, this reconstruction is quite speculative, but I think it best fits all the available evidence, while individual elements may be modified, dropped, or replaced without necessarily damaging the overall hypothesis.

## Notes:

(1) Rogue elements within our large national security apparatus probably affiliated with the Deep State Neocons decided to inflict severe damage upon the huge Chinese economy using biowarfare. The plan was to infect the key transport hub of Wuhan with Covid-19 so that the disease would invisibly spread throughout the entire country during the annual Lunar New Year travels, and they used the cover of the Wuhan International Military Games to slip a couple of operatives into the city to release the virus. My guess is that only a relatively small number of individuals were involved in this plot.

(2) The biological agent they released was designed primarily as an anti-economy rather than an anti-personnel weapon. Although Covid-19 has rather low fatality rates, it is extremely contagious, has a long pre-symptomatic infectious period, and can even spread by asymptomatic carriers, making it ideally suited for that purpose. Thus, once it established itself throughout most of China, it would be extremely difficult to eradicate and the resulting efforts to control it would inflict enormous damage upon China's economy and society.

(3) As a secondary operation, they decided to target Iran's political elites, possibly deploying a somewhat more deadly variant of the virus. Since political elites generally tend to be elderly, they would anyway suffer far greater fatalities.

(4) The deadly SARS and MERS outbreaks in East Asia and the Near East had never significantly spread back to America (or Europe), so the plotters wrongly assumed that the same would be the case with Covid-19. Anyway, since [international organizations always ranked the US and Europe as having the best and most effective public health systems for combating any disease epidemic](#), they believed that any possible blowback damage would be very minor.

(5) Only a small number of individuals were directly involved in this plot, and soon after the disease was successfully released in Wuhan, they decided to further safeguard America's own interests by alerting the appropriate units with the Defense Intelligence Agency, probably by fabricating some sort of supposed "intelligence leak." Basically, they arranged for the DIA to hear that Wuhan was apparently suffering a "cataclysmic" disease outbreak, thereby leading the DIA to prepare and distribute a secret report warning our own forces and allies to take appropriate precautions.

(6) Unfortunately for these plans, the Chinese government reacted with astonishing determination and effectiveness, and soon stamped out the disease. Meanwhile, the lackadaisical and incompetent American government largely ignored the problem, only reacting after the massive outbreak in Northern Italy had gotten media attention. Since the CDC had botched production of a testing kit, we had no means of recognizing that the disease was already spreading in our country, and the result was massive damage to America's economy and society. In effect, America suffered exactly the fate that had originally been

intended for its Chinese rival.

**Ron Unz is a former investment industry and software entrepreneur. He financed and ran the campaign in 1998 for California ballot [Proposition 227](#) that restricted bilingual education programs in public schools. Unz has been the financial supporter of an ideologically diverse list of causes. In the 1990s he was a donor to right-of-center and libertarian public policy organizations the Manhattan Institute and the Reason Foundation, and was the publisher of *American Conservative* from 2007-2013. He was a financial backer of the far-left *Counterpunch* magazine and supports a \$15 minimum wage. He is now the publisher of the Unz Report. Find Ron on Twitter [@RonUnz1](#)**

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