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Washington Post's "Wuhan Lab" conspiracy theory stands exposed

For nearly a year, the *Washington Post* has promoted the false claim that COVID-19 is a man-made virus released from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology.

This campaign went into overdrive on February 5, when the *Post* published an editorial embracing the position of the Trump State Department that "a laboratory accident or leak" represents a "plausible" explanation for the pandemic.



A view of the P4 lab inside the Wuhan Institute of Virology is seen after a visit by the World Health Organization team in Wuhan in China's Hubei province on Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021. (AP Photo/Ng Han Guan)

That editorial was published under the headline, "We're still missing the origin story of this pandemic. China is sitting on the answers." It called on the World Health Organization (WHO) team exploring the origins of the virus not to discount the Trump administration's claim that COVID-19 was a "weaponized" virus that originated in a Chinese lab.

But the WHO team did exactly that, making clear that the "Wuhan lab" theory did not meet its evidentiary criteria for further investigation—a polite way of saying that it is a lie.

The WHO's statements have clearly thrown the *Post* into crisis. The newspaper, which regularly promotes internet censorship in the guise that only "authoritative sources" such as itself should be accessible to the public, found itself exposed and at odds with the entire "authoritative" scientific community.

The *Post*'s response to the WHO's findings took the form of a February 22 editorial titled, "The US should reveal its intelligence about the Wuhan laboratory," which places the burden on the US government to back up the newspaper's own assertions about the man-made origins of COVID-19.

The *Post* writes:

When a World Health Organization team recently wrapped up its initial investigative visit to Wuhan, the team leader said the laboratory leak scenario was highly unlikely. However, State Department spokesman Ned Price said Feb. 9 that the Biden administration would "draw on information collected and analyzed by our own intelligence community to evaluate the report" from the WHO. Mr. Price emphasized the need for "full transparency."

Full transparency is needed from China but also from the United States. The intelligence behind Mr. Pompeo's statements should be declassified, with proper protection for sources and methods. The truth matters, and the United States should not hide any relevant evidence.

This seemingly even-handed presentation conceals a damning admission. It is a tacit acknowledgment that the *Post* does not possess a shred of evidence to back up its previous claims that the release of the virus is a "plausible" scenario.

In fact, this is as close as possible to a climb-down the newspaper could make, while still placing the universally accepted natural origins of the virus at the same level as Trump's conspiracy theory.

The fact is that the *Post* has been caught in a lie. The newspaper insists on claiming the "Wuhan lab" theory is a viable explanation for the pandemic, even as it asks for proof from the US government to back up its own claims of a man-made origin of the virus.

In early to mid-2020, when far-right conspiracy theorists first began circulating claims about the man-made origins of the disease, they were universally debunked. Asked in May, "Do you believe or is there evidence that the virus was made in the lab in China?", National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci declared, "A number of very qualified evolutionary biologists have said that everything about the stepwise evolution over time strongly indicates that it evolved in nature and then jumped species."

In March, *USA Today* published a fact check of the claim that "the coronavirus began in a Chinese laboratory." It concluded, "We rate this claim FALSE, based on our research. Overwhelming scientific evidence suggests the coronavirus originated in nature, and there is no evidence to suggest otherwise."

In the face of these categorical statements, the *Post* set out to rehabilitate the "Wuhan lab" narrative. On April 14, *Post* columnist Josh Rogin published an op-ed giving the newspaper's imprimatur to the Trump administration's false claims that COVID-19 emerged from a laboratory.

Under the headline, "State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses," Rogin wrote, "One senior administration official told me that the cables provide one more piece of evidence to support the possibility that the pandemic is the result of a lab accident in Wuhan."

He quoted the senior official as saying, "Right now, the ledger on the side of it leaking from the lab is packed with bullet points and there's almost nothing on the other side."

Tellingly, when the full diplomatic cable referenced by Rogin was released in July, the *Post* itself concluded, "The full cable does not strengthen the claim that an accident at the lab caused the virus to escape." Any reading of the cable makes clear it says nothing like

Rogin's interpretation. Instead, it makes clear that a shortage of qualified staff had precluded the lab from operating at full capacity and importing highly contagious diseases.

The release of the cable did nothing to discourage the *Post*, and it doubled down on its claims, culminating in the February 5 editorial. After its false assertions have been totally exposed before the public, the *Post* cannot make an honest accounting of its own claims, and it cannot admit that it was peddling lies. Instead, its demand is that the US government prove the newspaper's own allegations!

The promotion of the "Wuhan lab" conspiracy theory expresses the deep crisis of the entire US political establishment. Facing mounting social opposition at home, the US ruling elite desperately needs to manufacture an external enemy. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the breakdown of American imperialism's efforts to secure its global hegemony, raising the prospect of a military solution to China's rise.

But however much the "Wuhan lab" conspiracy theory may be necessary for US imperialism, it faces one major problem—it is an obvious lie from beginning to end, staining everyone who promotes it.

In this swamp of lies, conspiracy theories and social breakdown, one thing is clear. The *Washington Post* stands exposed as a purveyor of false and discredited propaganda. Its claim to be an "authoritative" source, standing above what it calls "fake news"—a term that it helped coin to discredit left-wing political opposition—is in tatters.

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