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The Wuhan lab conspiracy theory: American capitalism's "big lie"

Over the past week, the US print and broadcast media, the Biden administration and the US intelligence agencies have launched a furious propaganda campaign aimed at resurrecting the narrative that COVID-19 originated in a Chinese laboratory.



A lab at the Wuhan Institute of Virology [Credit: Chinatopix via AP]

This lie defies overwhelming scientific evidence and the findings of a World Health Organization (WHO) investigation released in late March. It will go down as one of the greatest falsehoods in human history—a colossal untruth that eclipses even the Bush administration's perjured claims about Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction."

There is no factual or scientific foundation for the claim that the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory. To date, the only evidence presented by the White House, the US

intelligence agencies and the media to support the claim is that employees at the Wuhan Institute of Virology became ill in late 2019 with symptoms that a State Department report acknowledged are “consistent with ... common seasonal illnesses.”

The illnesses at the Wuhan institute had previously been cited by the Trump administration to claim that China was responsible for deliberately spreading the pandemic—using a “weaponized virus” to inflict mass death on populations throughout the world. It has now been picked up by major media outlets and legitimized by the Biden administration.

On Thursday, the US Director of National Intelligence wrote that America’s “intelligence community” has “coalesced around two likely scenarios: either it emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, or it was a laboratory accident.” If COVID-19 had not “emerged naturally,” the disease was, as the Trump State Department asserted in January, created through biological engineering.

As the WHO’s inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 made clear, countless viruses similar to COVID-19 have been identified in bats, including one, RaTG13, that is 96.2 percent similar to Sars-COV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Sars-COV-1 was a bat-derived coronavirus that caused the 2003–2004 SARS outbreak.

In order for the claim that COVID-19 is biologically engineered to have any credibility, there would have to be something about the disease or its origins that is inconsistent with other naturally occurring viruses. But there is nothing to indicate this. As the WHO report on the origins of the disease stated, the “deliberate bioengineering” of COVID-19 has been “ruled out ... following analyses of the genome.”

The promotion of the lab-origin theory is driven by political conditions and social interests, motivated by two interrelated purposes.

First, it aims to divert attention from the actions of the US and other governments in implementing policies that led to deaths on a massive scale. As the public begins to recover from the overwhelming shock of the pandemic, there will be demands for explanations for why so many people died, along with accountability for those responsible.

From the beginning, the governments of all the major capitalist powers subordinated the response to the pandemic to the profit interests of the corporations, the greed of the capitalist oligarchs and the geopolitical objectives of imperialism. The measures that all scientists and epidemiologists agreed were necessary—including the shutdown of nonessential production with financial assistance to all those affected—were rejected because they threatened to undermine the financial markets and the interests of the rich.

As a direct consequence, more than three million people have died throughout the world, according to official figures, including more than 600,000 in the United States alone.

This week's testimony by Dominic Cummings, the former advisor for the UK government of Boris Johnson, made clear that the government carried out a “herd immunity” strategy, with advisors advocating the holding of “chicken pox parties” to spread the disease throughout the public. The government calculated that this policy would lead to the deaths of as many as 800,000 people.

In Brazil, Senate inquiries into the pandemic have further demonstrated that the government of Jair Bolsonaro deliberately pursued a policy of allowing the virus to spread without restraint, anticipating that the death toll could reach as high as 1.4 million (it is currently at 450,000).

In the United States, after initial partial restraints in March of 2020 that were implemented following an upsurge of social unrest, the Trump administration spearheaded the campaign to get workers back to work under the slogan “the cure can’t be worse than the disease.” While this homicidal policy was most clearly articulated by Trump, it received the support of the media and was implemented by state governments run by both Republicans and Democrats.

The leaders of the capitalist governments have blood on their hands, and they are looking for a scapegoat: China.

Second, the Wuhan lab lie seeks to drum up nationalist hatred to support the Biden administration’s central strategic aim: the preparation for economic and potentially military conflict with China.

Since coming into office, the Biden administration has declared that the United States is at an “inflection point,” and that it must carry out a struggle to “win the 21st century” against China. The US media has tried, unsuccessfully, to interest the public in the claim, stoked by the intelligence agencies, that China is carrying out genocide against its Uighur Muslim population. But the campaign has not had its intended effect to date.

It is therefore necessary to concoct a far more visceral and dangerous lie, that China is responsible for a deadly pandemic that has killed so many people that nearly every American knows one of its victims.

The most direct precedent for the promotion of the Wuhan laboratory lie is the Bush administration’s fabricated claims that Iraq was hiding “weapons of mass destruction,” which served as the pretext for the invasion of Iraq. The method was exactly the same. Ambiguously worded findings from the US intelligence agencies, funneled through “anonymous sources” by the media, together with openly perjured statements by administration officials, concocted a pretext for a war that has killed over a million people.

The structure and methods of the “Wuhan lab” conspiracy theory are highly similar to other conspiracy theories promoted for political purposes, with which the propagandists in Washington and other world capitals are very familiar. In December 2017, the *New York Times* published an article, “Fingerprints of Russian Disinformation: From AIDS to Fake News,” which claimed that Soviet and East German intelligence agencies manufactured a conspiracy theory about the origins of HIV.

“Called Operation Infektion by the East German foreign intelligence services,” the *Times* wrote, “the 1980s disinformation campaign seeded a conspiracy theory that the virus that causes AIDS was the product of biological weapons experiments conducted by the United States.”

In 1985, an Internal KGB document noted that the Soviet intelligence agency was seeking to spread the view “that this disease is the result of secret experiments by the USA’s secret services and the Pentagon with new types of biological weapons that have spun out of control.” The KGB placed an article in an Indian newspaper titled “AIDS May Invade India: Mystery Disease Caused by U.S. Experiments,” claiming the disease originated in a US military laboratory in Fort Detrick, Maryland.

As a result of this disinformation campaign, a 2005 study by the RAND Corporation and Oregon State University revealed that nearly 50 percent of African Americans thought AIDS was man-made. The prevalence of this conspiracy theory around the world made it more difficult to launch a scientific response to the AIDS epidemic—including in the Soviet Union itself.

The *Times* quotes historian Thomas Boghardt to explain the disinformation technique: “Throw enough dirt, and some will stick.”

The *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the other major media outlets, along with the Biden administration, are using this technique to spread the Wuhan Lab lie. While the *Times* article was intended to promote the “fake news” narrative of “Russian meddling,” the fact is that the American ruling class is now the biggest propagator of “fake news.”

The legitimization of the Wuhan Lab lie will have incalculable political consequences within the United States. If the “weaponized virus” claim promoted by the extreme right is now legitimate, what about the other lies and conspiracies promoted by the Trump administration: Trump’s “birther” claim that Obama was not an American citizen, the “pizzagate” conspiracy theory that high-level Democratic Party operatives were engaged in a child prostitution ring, and, above all, the claim that the 2020 election was stolen, which underlay the January 6 fascistic insurrection.

Significantly, the media is now hailing the “sophisticated” fascist Tom Cotton, senator from Arkansas, as an important voice in the “debate” over the origins of the coronavirus. The “history books will reward” Cotton for promoting the Wuhan lab theory, declared the *Washington Post*’s lead fact-checker Glenn Kessler.

Cotton infamously published an op-ed in July 2020 calling on Trump to “send in the troops” to suppress mass protests against police violence. He is a leading proponent of the lie that Donald Trump won the 2020 presidential election, and he objected to the certification of election votes on January 6 in coordination with the mob that stormed the Capitol.

Domestically, this lie will have the effect of delegitimizing popular opposition and preparing the grounds for mass censorship, with all those who criticize government policy being painted as agents of China. Already, an article by the *World Socialist Web Site* exposing the *Washington Post*'s promotion of the Wuhan Lab conspiracy theory was censored on Facebook for two months, leading to the suspension of the accounts that tried to share it. Facebook, meanwhile, has announced that it will no longer limit posts promoting the conspiracy theory that the virus was manufactured in a Chinese laboratory.

Once this lie enters the political bloodstream of America, it will have poisonous and uncontrollable effects. It will trigger witch-hunts, threats and violent intimidation against scientists and all those who call for a scientific response to the raging pandemic. Already, incidents of anti-Asian violence are on the rise.

The Chinese government, for its part, cannot but interpret the promotion of this lie as preparation for war, responding in a way that will make escalation more likely, creating a deadly cycle of militarization. A military conflict between the United States and China—the largest economies and militaries in the world—would have catastrophic consequences for all of humanity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all workers, scientists and intellectuals to oppose the colossal lie being propagated by the US government and media. Scientists have a duty to educate the public and oppose the xenophobic perversion of science. Journalists must seriously investigate and expose the efforts to promote and disseminate this lie.

Working people must counter the lie of the capitalist oligarchs with the demand for true accountability. Those responsible for the “herd immunity” policy, along with the corporate executives who profited off of it, must be held to account.

We call on workers to reject the efforts by the ruling classes to lay the blame for the crimes of American capitalism at the feet of China. If workers are to stop the pandemic that has killed so many, they must reject the capitalists' efforts to incite nationalist hatred, ignorance and violence through the struggle to unite the world's working class on the basis of a socialist perspective.

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