



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairman Bill Foster (D-IL)
of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight

Investigations & Oversight Subcommittee:
Principles for Outbreak Investigation: COVID-19 and Future Infectious Diseases
July 14, 2021

Good morning, and welcome and thanks to our members and panelists.

I guess I do not have to remind people of the importance of the topic we are discussing today: the Origins of COVID-19.

For the past year and a half, the Science Committee and Congress have been appropriately focused on optimizing our response to the pandemic and making sure that the full power of our country's scientific apparatus is engaged in that battle. But now that vaccines are succeeding at easing the crushing national caseload of COVID-19, it is time to turn some of our attention to how that international catastrophe started, and what can be done to lessen the toll of future outbreaks. We are convening this first hearing to look at the scientific underpinnings of that investigation.

There is one profoundly correct reason to pursue this rigorous investigation: to help protect public health and our national security in the future. If we don't learn everything that we can about how infectious diseases like COVID-19 get started, we will be less safe moving forward.

As many of you know, I spent most of my career in science, before spending the last decade in Congress. I'd like to thank our witnesses for their very thoughtful written testimony, that allowed me to spend some time reading it over last night and remembering what it was like to think like a scientist.

In Science, if you see an interesting dataset, you ask what logically possible hypotheses could explain that data, you then look at the statistical likelihood of each hypothesis with a given set of prior assumptions, then you ask what additional data or measurements needed to confirm or refute each hypothesis. Then, armed with that new information, including the uncertainties, you enter the engineering phase of the problem, using that information to make our systems work better. That is why I feel so fortunate to have an engineer, Ranking Member Obernolte, as my partner on this subcommittee.

Because in politics it is often very different. If you see something interesting, the first question is often not what is true, but what can you convince people is true, like a lawyer convincing a jury. Instead of looking at the full set of facts, we look to cherry-pick facts to support your political position. When this happens, it leads to bad policy that, in the case of COVID-19, has

killed millions of people around the world. That is why I am proud of the way the House Science Committee conducts its business, by letting facts, logic and science lead the way.

Unfortunately, we do not at present have the full set of facts. Right now, American citizens and senior government officials have suspicions about China's role. And there is no disputing that the Chinese government has withheld information and obfuscated efforts to understand the origins. Chinese scientists were very quick to make the genome sequence of SARS-CoV-2 available to the public back in January of 2020. This is the master key that NIH and drugmakers needed to start work on a vaccine, and those Chinese scientists are heroes for publishing it. But they took this bold step in spite of the Chinese government, without its blessing.

Let the record show that Members of Congress understand that the lack of transparency from the Chinese government about health emergencies of international consequence is a very serious geopolitical and science diplomacy challenge. It is a threat to our nation, and it pre-dates the COVID-19 crisis.

At the same time, China's lack of transparency is distinct from the body of epidemiological data around the origins of COVID-19. The absence of data is not itself evidence of a lab leak or something more sinister. Our witnesses today will help us set expectations and understand what real evidence is and what other ingredients comprise a credible inquiry on disease origins.

Patience may be one of those ingredients. We all remember the SARS virus of 2003. It took 15 years to identify the original source of that virus. It was ultimately found in a bat cave, 1,000 kilometers from the site of the original outbreak.

President Biden has asked the U.S. intelligence community to report back by late August on any new information that could bring us closer to a conclusion about the origins of COVID-19. This is a constructive step, but I would caution that there is a very good chance that we still won't have all the answers after that report comes back. Like so many important topics in science, the deliberate endeavor of establishing origins of COVID is likely nowhere near as simple as we'd like it to be. If epidemiology were easy, we'd have the answer by now. If the intelligence community were in possession of a smoking gun about COVID origins, I believe we'd know about it.

At today's hearing, I intend today to establish some expectations of federal and global leaders in their efforts to investigate the origins of COVID-19 and future diseases. We will not tolerate equivocation and innuendo from public officials. Where the facts aren't clear enough to support a conclusion, do not offer one just to humor the news media. Take care to remember the distinction between the theories of a journalist or a blogger with the observations of an experienced science professional with first-hand knowledge of the virus.

The Science Committee has a long history of playing the long game, of seeing the 10,000 foot view on topics that push the boundaries of human understanding, and of transcending the political noise. Our witnesses are going to help steer the origins conversation to the high road, where scientific expertise, transparency, objectivity and data are paramount. We have the four corners of outbreak investigation represented today's panel: microbiology, virology, epidemiology and zoonotics. To the four of you: Too many of your peers have experienced rancor and even threats for speaking publicly about this politically hot topic, and that really is appalling. Your participation today is a service to the public.

I yield to Ranking Member Obernolte.