

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Behind Closed Doors:

The Spy-World Scientists Who Argued Covid Was a Lab Leak

Written by Michael R. Gordon and Warren P. Strobel (Dec. 26, 2024)

<https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/fbi-covid-19-pandemic-lab-leak-theory-dfbd8a51>

The idea that the pandemic's origins lie with a research facility in China was once labeled a conspiracy theory

A car and driver had been readied to whisk Jason Bannan from FBI headquarters early one morning in August 2021 to brief the White House on a novel virus that was killing hundreds of thousands of Americans and had stopped the world in its tracks.

Bannan had been told by his superiors to be on hand in case the Federal Bureau of Investigation was asked to join a top intelligence community briefing for the president. But the White House summons never came.

Bannan, a Ph.D. in microbiology, had joined the bureau after the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington when the agency bulked up its expertise to deal with the threat of germ weapons, toxins and other weapons of mass destruction.

But for more than a year he had spent most of his waking hours on the Covid-19 virus that had seeped out of China in 2019.

Frustrated by China's stonewalling, President Biden had ordered an urgent assessment by the U.S. intelligence agencies and national laboratories on whether the virus had leapt from an animal to a human or had escaped from a Chinese lab that had been doing extensive work on coronaviruses.

The dominant view within the intelligence community was clear when Avril Haines, the director of national intelligence, and a couple of her senior analysts, briefed Biden and his top aides on Aug. 24. The National Intelligence Council, a body of senior intelligence officers who reported to Haines and that organized the intelligence review, had concluded with "low confidence" that Covid-19 had emerged when the virus leapt from an animal to a human. So did four intelligence agencies.

At the time, the FBI was the only agency that concluded a lab leak was likely, a judgment it had rendered with "moderate confidence." But neither Bannan nor any other FBI officials were at the briefing to make their case first hand to the president.

"Being the only agency that assessed that a laboratory origin was more likely, and the agency that expressed the highest level of confidence in its analysis of the source of the pandemic, we anticipated the FBI would be asked to attend the briefing," Bannan recalled in his first on-the-record interview on the subject. "I find it surprising that the White House didn't ask."

A spokeswoman for the Director of National Intelligence's office said that it wasn't standard practice to invite representatives from individual agencies to briefings for the president and that divergent views within the intelligence community were fairly represented.

"The Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the National Intelligence Council's work on Covid-19 origins complied with all of the Intelligence Community's analytic standards, including objectivity," the spokeswoman said.

But an investigation by The Wall Street Journal shows that the disagreements among intelligence experts over what should be included in the report ran deeper than is publicly known. Nor were the FBI scientists the only ones who believed that the intelligence directorate's review didn't tell the whole story.

Three scientists at the National Center for Medical Intelligence, part of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency, conducted a scientific study that concluded that Covid-19 was manipulated in a laboratory in a risky research effort. But that analysis was at odds with the assessment of their parent agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and wasn't incorporated in the report presented to Biden.

The DIA Inspector General's office opened an inquiry in the spring into whether the scientists' assessment was mishandled or suppressed, people familiar with the matter said. A spokesman for the agency declined to comment on whether this inquiry was continuing, had been completed and what it might have included.

Five years after Covid-19 first emerged, the origin of the virus that killed more than 1.2 million Americans and over seven million people worldwide has yet to be established. The pace of U.S. intelligence investigation has slackened, as many intelligence analysts who were assigned to the crash effort have shifted to other priorities.

Congressional efforts to establish a national task force to investigate the origin of and response to Covid-19 that would be styled after the 9/11 Commission floundered, a victim of political infighting. Senate and House committees that dug into the pandemic unearthed some significant leads but their work often became mired in partisan attacks.

Now some current and former officials say a fresh look is needed, including at the analysis that wasn't included in the 2021 intelligence report.

'The sprint'

The U.S. was deep in the grip of the pandemic in May 2021 when Biden ordered an urgent study by the intelligence community into Covid's origins, which he said should be completed in 90 days. The effort became known as the "90-day sprint."

At that point, the question of the virus's origins was dividing the scientific community. The debate came down to two prominent theories. The zoonotic theory held that the Covid virus, like other deadly pathogens before it, had jumped to humans from an infected animal, possibly as a result of China's extensive wildlife animal trade. The other scenario, known as "lab leak," was based on the idea that the virus had escaped from a research facility, such as the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which conducted coronavirus research.

The debate over the virus's origins was politically divisive. Then-President Trump said in May 2020 that he had evidence that the virus had emerged from a Chinese lab but insisted that the information was too sensitive to disclose. Trump's critics said the White House was trying to divert attention from its management of the response to the pandemic.

Those two theories have also divided the scientific community. In February 2020, more than two dozen scientists published a statement in the medical journal *Lancet*, calling the lab leak hypothesis a conspiracy theory that would jeopardize global cooperation in the struggle against the virus. One of the authors was Peter Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance, a nonprofit that has worked extensively on coronavirus research with the Wuhan institute.

That statement was followed a month later by a March 2020 paper on the "proximal origins" of Covid-19, in which Kristian Andersen of the Scripps Research Institute and four other scientists argued that the virus wasn't "purposefully manipulated" in the laboratory and had almost certainly had natural origins.

But the lab theory has gained credibility. Ralph Baric, a professor at the University of North Carolina who had done pioneering work on coronaviruses with Shi Zhengli, the Wuhan institute's leading bat coronavirus expert, told Congress earlier this year that the facility's procedures for carrying out research on bat viruses were "irresponsible" since it was done in a laboratory with inadequate precautions for containing biological agents.

By the time Biden ordered his review in 2021, two U.S. intelligence organizations supported the zoonotic theory, and one, the FBI, suspected a lab mishap. Other intelligence agencies said at the time that they didn't have enough information to render a judgment.

The intelligence agencies that drilled into the issue brought a range of capabilities, from the National Security Agency, which intercepts foreign communications, to the FBI, which has a cadre of experts, including some who worked in the National Bioforensic Analysis Center, a laboratory for handling biological agents at Fort Detrick, Md.

One of those experts was Bannan, who had a doctorate from the University of Arizona. He was serving as a senior scientist in an agency lab in Quantico, Va., when he got a call from a superior who wanted to know if he was prepared to come to work at the bureau's headquarters for the directorate for weapons of mass destruction.

He arrived at the FBI's near-empty Hoover building in early 2020 as most government employees were still working remotely. Bannan had faced his share of tough cases, including working for the task force that established that a scientist at Fort Detrick had sent anthrax-filled letters to lawmakers and others, in what became the worst biological attack in U.S. history. But determining the origins of Covid presented unique challenges: the initial outbreak had happened 7,500 miles away in a country that was withholding cooperation.

The inquiry was barely under way when divisions emerged in the initial conference calls among the intelligence agency experts held over Biden's tasking.

Much of the intelligence community was dismissive about the World Health Organization's early efforts to investigate the virus's origins, which many U.S. officials believe was unduly constrained by the Chinese. After traveling to China in early 2021, a team of experts sent by WHO concluded in a joint report with Chinese scientists that the virus most likely moved from bats to humans via another animal.

The FBI was already supporting the lab theory, but Adrienne Keen, a State Department official who had served as a consultant to WHO, advocated for taking the zoonotic theory seriously. She said that the WHO report shouldn't be completely discounted, according to participants.

Keen, who had a Ph.D. in infectious disease modeling from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, left the State Department shortly after the 90-day sprint to become the director for Global Health Security for the National Intelligence Council. The council was given a central role in organizing the report under the supervision of James Murphy, the national intelligence officer for weapons of mass destruction.

With no cooperation from Beijing, much of the debate turned on what was known about previous coronaviruses and work at the Wuhan institute.

One disagreement centered on comparison of the Covid-19 pandemic with other outbreaks. The National Intelligence Council had prepared a chart for inclusion in the report that depicted how the Covid-19 pandemic compared with past zoonotic outbreaks in which pathogens had leapt to a human from animals, including Ebola, MERS and Nipah. FBI experts argued that this was a case of apples and oranges, saying these earlier diseases were strikingly different from coronaviruses, which previously had been far less contagious. But the council's intelligence officers argued the chart illustrated the principle of zoonotic transfer and it was included in the report.

Another debate erupted over the geographic origin of Covid-19. FBI experts argued that a thesis by Yu Ping, a young scientist at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, indicated that the type of coronavirus that was responsible for the pandemic was indigenous to the mountainous Yunnan province in western China and wasn't found in Hubei province where the city of Wuhan is located.

If Covid-19 had spread naturally from a bat to a host animal and then a human, as proponents of the zoonotic theory argued, early cases should have also been detected in the vast area between Yunnan and Wuhan, a distance of more than 1,500 kilometers. That region, which has a population of hundreds of millions of people, contains thousands of live animal markets.

But Keen took the view that the geographic origin of the virus wasn't known and that the absence of cases in southwest China wasn't relevant. Keen, who is now a scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also argued that the Chinese didn't have an effective surveillance network to uncover such outbreaks in rural areas, an argument the FBI experts also challenged. That left the two sides far apart on the most fundamental questions of how the virus emerged.

‘Off the reservation’

As the FBI continued to push to ensure the lab theory was taken seriously, there were also debates at the Defense Intelligence Agency, which houses the main U.S. government organization dedicated to medical intelligence. The National Center for Medical Intelligence looks at health threats around the world that might endanger U.S. troops, such as infectious diseases and biological weapons.

Three scientists there—John Hardham, Robert Cutlip and Jean-Paul Chretien—conducted a genomic analysis that concluded that the virus had been manipulated in a laboratory. Specifically they concluded that a segment of the “spike protein” that enables the virus to gain entry into human cells was constructed using techniques developed in the Wuhan lab that were described in a 2008 Chinese scientific paper. That was an indication, they argued, that the Chinese scientists were conducting “gain of function” research to see if the virus could infect humans.

Hardham was a Ph.D. and Navy reserve captain, while Cutlip, a longtime DIA scientist, had a doctorate in biomedical engineering and had served on a White House task force on the virus during the Trump administration. Chretien, a U.S. Navy doctor, had worked on biodefense for the White House and had been in charge of the pandemic warning team for the center.

They briefed their counterparts, including one of Bannan's partners, an FBI agent with a Ph.D., on their initial findings. But in July 2021 they were instructed by a superior at the medical intelligence center not to continue sharing their work with the FBI, which they were told was “off the reservation,” according to people familiar with the matter. That order was earlier reported by The Australian.

Nor were all of their proposed edits to the National Intelligence Council report accepted.

Hardham, Cutlip and Chretien also wrote an unclassified May 2020 paper that challenged the “proximal origin” assessment. They weren't allowed to circulate it outside of the medical intelligence center, but it leaked three years later and was entered into the record by Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R., Ohio) when he chaired a hearing on the pandemic for a House committee investigating the virus's origin.

Retired Army Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier, the DIA director during the report's preparation, declined to comment on whether he was aware of the scientists' work at the time. But he has previously said publicly that he supported the zoonotic theory. A spokesman for the DIA didn't respond to a request for comment.

The intelligence officials who briefed Biden in August 2021 at the White House all wore masks to protect them against the still-raging pandemic, as did the president. The participants included Haines, the president's top intelligence official, and Murphy, from the National Intelligence Council. They were accompanied by another analyst from Haines's office and a technical expert from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Since the National Intelligence Council was among proponents of the zoonotic theory, and the CIA, like two other agencies, had declined to take a stand either way, the makeup of the briefing meant that no proponents of the lab leak theory were present. A spokesman for Haines's office said that the FBI assessment that pointed to a lab leak was accurately presented.

More than three years after that briefing, the intelligence agencies continue to investigate, though the full-court press that was mounted during the 90-day sprint is long over. In one sign that some government agencies are still looking at the issue, the Energy Department last year joined the FBI in identifying a lab leak as the most likely source.

In a June 2023 report requested by Congress, Haines's office also declassified more information about the Wuhan institute. The report noted that some of the institute's scientists "have genetically engineered coronaviruses using common laboratory practices." But it added that the U.S. intelligence community had no information that this work involved the virus that caused the pandemic or a "close progenitor," or that the institute held such viruses in its stockpiles before the 2019 outbreak.

Now retired from the FBI and working as a consultant, Bannan has kept a low profile. He hasn't been among the parade of witnesses who have appeared in the often-partisan debates in Congress over Covid-19 origins. Among those who testified was Dr. Anthony Fauci, former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who said he still believes that the virus more likely has natural origins. Fauci has denied ever calling the lab leak a conspiracy theory and says that scenario can't be excluded.

While the August 2021 intelligence report suggests that a conclusive assessment about the virus's origin cannot likely be made without China's cooperation, Bannan is urging that scientists inside and outside of government take another look at the evidence that was fought over during the 90-day sprint.

"What ended up on the intelligence community's cutting-room floor needs to be re-examined," said Bannan.

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