



COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery by Ranking Member Jay Obernolte

Investigations and Oversight Hearing entitled, “Principles for Outbreak
Investigation: COVID-19 and Future Infectious Diseases

July 14, 2021

Thank you, Chairman Foster, for holding today’s hearing on principles for investigating the origins of COVID-19. And thank you to our witnesses for appearing before us today.

Before I begin, I’d like to take a moment to commend Chairman Foster for his bipartisanship and his willingness to hold the first official House Committee hearing related to the origins of COVID-19. I’m hopeful that this hearing will serve as an example of how Congress can work together to move forward on investigating the origins of this terrible pandemic.

Today’s hearing is an opportunity for this Committee to begin looking into the origins of COVID-19 and to discuss principles and standards by which an effective investigation into its origins can and should be conducted. It is also an opportunity to reflect on some of the lessons learned over the past 18 months about science communication, the importance of fair and open public discourse about scientific hypotheses, and the impact that media censorship, the politicization of science, and a lack of scientific integrity has had on efforts thus far to investigate the origins of this pandemic.

Since the early days of the pandemic, discourse and discussion regarding the origins of COVID-19 have unfortunately been hampered by the politicization of science.

Renowned, reputable scientists have—at critical times during the pandemic—presented their opinions as if they were scientific fact. And avoidable conflicts of interest have called into question the independence and impartiality of efforts that have been undertaken to examine the origins of COVID-19, including those at the World Health Organization. These shortcomings have made it more difficult to have fair and open discourse about the origins issue.

Also, the actions of media, big tech, and their respective fact checkers have compounded this difficulty. During the onset of the pandemic, some media outlets latched on to a preordained narrative about the origins of COVID-19 and dismissed competing theories as false and even xenophobic conspiracy theories.

Social media companies even censored information about COVID's origins, labeling posts as misinformation, despite there being no conclusive evidence for one theory over another.

The effect of these actions was to shut down legitimate scientific discourse and inquiry. They made it more difficult for scientists and the public at large to challenge what had been held out by only a few as scientific consensus, even where the science and facts supported alternative theories and hypotheses.

Fear of retaliation, of being labeled as a xenophobic conspiracy theorist, and of being ostracized by the scientific community led some scientists to self-censor and remain silent instead of searching publicly and transparently for the truth.

Censorship in any form is troubling, but all the more so when it prevents scientific inquiry. Understanding the origins of COVID matters—not so that we can assign blame to a specific country or politician, but so we can better prevent future outbreaks.

That's my intention here today as we consider the principles that should inform how we investigate disease outbreaks. We must acknowledge the shortcomings that have complicated inquiries into the origins issue. I'd also like to acknowledge the progress that has been made, as many scientists, scholars, and journalists alike are now publicly calling for a renewed investigation into the origins of COVID-19.

It is my hope that we can move forward with a more open discourse and a productive dialogue about the principles and standards by which an effective origins investigation should be undertaken. Although we may never definitively know the origin of COVID-19—thanks in no small part to the Chinese Communist Party's lack of transparency and cooperation—that does not mean that an investigation into its origins will not bear fruit. To the contrary, the facts and evidence that are uncovered during such an investigation will almost certainly help us prepare for future pandemics, irrespective of its conclusion.

I am looking forward to learning more today about what a proper investigation should look like, as well as the principles and standards that should form the framework of such an investigation. I also hope we learn how to effectively screen for conflicts of interest and reinforce the scientific principles of impartiality, transparency, and openness in this endeavor.

I again want to thank Chairman Foster for holding today's hearing, and to thank our witnesses for appearing before us today to discuss this important issue.

I yield back the balance of my time.