

# Pompeo-led effort to hunt down Covid lab theory shut down by Biden administration over concerns about quality of evidence

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**Washington (CNN)** — [President Joe Biden](#)'s team shut down a closely-held State Department effort launched late in the Trump administration to prove the coronavirus originated in a Chinese lab over concerns about the quality of its work, according to three sources familiar with the decision.

The existence of the State Department inquiry and its termination this spring by the Biden administration -- neither of which has been previously reported -- comes to light amid renewed interest in whether the [virus could have leaked out](#) of a Wuhan lab with links to the Chinese military. The Biden administration is also facing scrutiny of its own efforts to determine if the Chinese government was responsible for the virus.

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State Dept. officials say it was an honest effort to prove what many initially dismissed: that China's biological weapons program could have had a greater role in the pandemic's origin in Wuhan, according to two additional sources.

But the inquiry quickly became mired in internal discord amid concerns that it was part of a broader politicized effort by the Trump administration to blame China and cherry-pick facts to prove a theory.

The decision to terminate the inquiry, which was run primarily out of the State Department's arms control and verification bureau, was made after Biden officials were briefed on the team's draft findings in February and March of this year, a State Department spokesperson said. Questions were raised about the legitimacy of the findings and the project was deemed to be an ineffective use of resources, explained a source familiar with the decision.

Sources involved in the Trump-era inquiry rejected criticisms over the quality of their work and told CNN their objective had been to examine scientific research and information from the US intelligence community which backed the lab leak theory and shone more light on how it could have emerged in the lab.

A day after CNN reported this story, the State Department disputed that it had shut down the Trump-era inquiry and

instead said that its work had been completed. Several sources involved with the inquiry who spoke to CNN said it was their impression that there was more work to be done.

On Wednesday, Biden [issued a statement](#) that he has directed the US intelligence community to redouble its efforts in investigating the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic and report back to him in 90 days.

Though Biden officials shut down this particular inquiry, they [remain skeptical](#) of Beijing's role in limiting investigators from accessing information that may be pertinent to the origins of the virus. US intelligence agencies continue to examine the question of whether the virus emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals or if it could have been the result of a laboratory accident.

One US intelligence report, which CNN and the Wall Street Journal [recently reported on](#), found that several researchers at China's Wuhan Institute of Virology fell ill in November 2019 and had to be hospitalized, a new detail which has fueled the continued debate about the virus's origin. The exact nature of their symptoms remain unclear.

A State Department spokesperson confirmed work on the inquiry had stopped, saying, "Even though this discrete project has concluded, the State Department continues to work with the interagency to look into the COVID origins issue."

## Origins of the inquiry

The State Department project began in late 2020, months after Pompeo and President Donald Trump first claimed that the virus could have originated from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. In May 2020, [Pompeo claimed](#) there was "enormous evidence" and a "significant amount of evidence" to support the claim -- despite the US intelligence community saying there was no definitive answer as to precisely where and how the virus began transmitting.

Pompeo did not respond to CNN's requests for comment.

The inquiry also came amid a broader effort by some in the Trump administration to look for ways to [blame the Chinese government](#) for the outbreak and deflect responsibility from its own handling of the virus, which had



Trump and Pompeo regularly spoke about the China virus, then continued suggestions that the virus originated in a lab raised concerns among some State Department and intelligence officials over what they viewed as attempts to politicize what little the US knew about the virus's origins. But those involved in the effort looked at it as more of a need to probe unanswered questions, rather than a politically motivated program.

Still, the quiet inquiry eventually became a contentious issue at the State Department during the few months it was active.

Proponents of the effort, including Pompeo himself, argued that the potential connection between the Chinese military and the pandemic needed to be investigated and that the administration was justified to include the inquiry in the State Department's ongoing and legally mandated review of countries' compliance with arms control treaties, according to four sources familiar with the matter.

Officials involved in the effort relied on scientific research as well as public and classified information to probe the lab leak theory, including looking into any possible connection between the virus and the Chinese government's biological weapons program, three of the sources told CNN.

The Chinese government is party to the major international agreements regulating biological weapons which prohibit developing, producing, transferring or stockpiling of bacteriological and toxin weapons. The US government has said that it believes China maintained an offensive biological weapons program even after joining the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in 1984. China refutes this.

Dr. Anthony Fauci [recently said he is not convinced](#) that Covid-19 developed naturally but last spring he said the US strongly leaned toward the idea that the virus could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated. Officials involved in the State Department inquiry believed Fauci's initial comments last year were "baseless."

"People in the US government were working on the question of where Covid-19 came from but there was no other effort that we knew of that took the lab leak possibility seriously enough to focus on digging into certain aspects, questions and uncertainties," said David Feith, a former senior State Department official who was briefed on the efforts.

**Related Article:** Why is Anthony Fauci hedging on the origins of the coronavirus?

## 'Suspicious as hell'

Opponents of the State Department inquiry viewed the effort as alarming because those working on it appeared to actively hide their work from skeptics, two sources said.

"The way they did their work was suspicious as hell," said one former State Department official who was familiar with the effort. "They basically conducted it in secret, cutting out the State Department's technical experts and the Intelligence Community, and then trying to brief certain senior officials in the interagency on their 'tentative conclusions' even before they'd let the department leaders they worked for know an investigation was underway at all."

During the final weeks of the Trump administration, when senior officials in the department who had been shielded from the efforts learned about how far the inquiry had gone, they pushed for a panel of outside scientists to review the findings. When scientists looked at the data, during a 3-hour long meeting in early January, the evidence collected up until that point appeared inconclusive and misguided, two sources said.

"It smelled like they were just fishing to justify pre-determined conclusions and cut out experts who could critique their 'science,' " said the former official familiar with the effort. "The reason for all this became clear when real scientists finally got a chance to see their analysis, and [the inquiry's] 'statistical' case fell apart."



Ford called aspects of the analysis "gravely flawed" and urged officials "against suggesting that there is anything inherently suspicious -- and suggestive of biological warfare activity -- about People's Liberation Army involvement at WIV on classified projects."

## 'Dissenting perspectives on purpose'

But those involved in the project -- who said they relied on the intelligence community throughout their inquiry -- defended their efforts.

"Our scientific consulting process involved dissenting perspectives on purpose," said one source involved in the project. "It was a meeting with deliberative disagreement."

"There was a total misunderstanding of the entire process. We used experts and one specific team of experts but there was no consensus in the IC," said a second former official working on the effort. "The IC was saying this is a public health issue and this has nothing to do with biological weapons. Well, we said, how do we know that?"

Pompeo put out [a statement](#) as the Trump administration was leaving office that said the US had determined collaboration between the Wuhan lab where Covid-19 research has been conducted on bats, and secret Chinese military projects. The process behind declassifying the intelligence in that statement took weeks, and certain details were scrubbed from the final version which was put out, sources familiar with the process told CNN. The State Department's small group looking into the lab leak theory contributed to that fact sheet, but most of its information came from the US intelligence community, sources told CNN.

When the Biden administration took office, it did not see any significant doubts in the datapoints featured in the fact sheet Pompeo put out, according to one source familiar. The information was vetted by the intelligence community but it was also a select few datapoints from a mountain of data in what the Biden administration viewed as a deliberate effort to put more weight into the lab leak theory while they ignored information suggesting the virus spread naturally from animals to humans.

## Biden administration critical of the WHO

National security adviser Jake Sullivan has been vocal in criticizing the World Health Organization's efforts thus far, which have been inhibited by the Chinese government restricting their access.

"Going forward, all countries, including China, should participate in a transparent and robust process for preventing and responding to health emergencies, so that the world learns as much as possible as soon as possible," Sullivan said in February. The State Department has echoed those calls.

The Biden administration's effort to investigate the origins of the pandemic is primarily focused on rallying pressure and support for the WHO's investigation to be transparent and fulsome, explained a Biden administration official.

The WHO, too, has [said the theory](#) needs more investigation and more access is required.

Biden national security officials have also stated publicly that the US intelligence community does not have any solid details about the origin of the virus.

"It is absolutely accurate the intelligence community does not know exactly where, when or how Covid-19 virus was transmitted initially," US Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines said last month during a congressional briefing.

Despite continued calls for the need to understand what caused the Covid-19 outbreak more clearly as a way of preventing a future pandemic, the US still is far from understanding its precise origin.



governments, our people, and our public health institutions for the next health crisis," the State Department spokesperson said.

*This story has been updated with comments from the State Department refuting that the Trump-era inquiry had been shut down, and also with a new statement from the President directing intelligence agencies to redouble efforts to investigate the origins of the pandemic.*

*CNN's Natasha Bertrand contributed to this report.*



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