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Fauci is defiant as congressional hearing into covid origins fails to produce smoking gun

Owen Dyer

Anthony Fauci, the former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who became the face of the US government's covid response under two presidents, pushed back against Republican allegations that US research dollars had helped to trigger the pandemic.

Accused by Republicans at a congressional hearing on 3 June of having suppressed inquiry into covid-19's origins, Fauci read out an email he wrote in February 2020 to a scientist who believed the virus might have leaked from a laboratory, urging him to quickly report his concerns to the FBI if he determined that they were valid.

"It is inconceivable that anyone who reads this email could conclude that I was trying to cover up the possibility of a laboratory leak," said Fauci.

It was Fauci's first public appearance before a congressional committee since Republicans took the House majority.

At the hearing, Fauci was confronted with emails that Republicans obtained from a former top aide in his office, David Morens, in which Morens discussed using phone calls and private email accounts to evade his legal responsibility to preserve government records under the Freedom of Information Act.¹

Many of Morens' conversations were with Peter Daszak, a British zoologist who led EcoHealth Alliance. This group received US funding to investigate potentially dangerous coronaviruses before the pandemic. Some of the work was done at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV).

Last month, the US health department banned Daszak from getting further grant funding, saying that he had failed in his duty to ensure proper safety procedures at WIV and did not report an experiment which represented a prohibited gain of function in a virus.²

Lawmakers from both parties assailed Morens at a 23 May hearing, where he said he was embarrassed by the shame he had brought on the National Institutes of Health (NIH) but that he couldn't "put the toothpaste back in the tube."

No clear evidence of an attempt to cover up pandemic origins emerged, however. The messages that Morens sought to conceal instead contained blunt commentary about Fauci's public critics.

Fauci distanced himself from Morens at the 3 June hearing, calling Morens' actions "a terrible thing." He denied using private emails for government business.

Democrats appeared buoyed by Fauci's performance, releasing a report on the hearing entitled *Republicans'*

Fauci flop.³ Republicans have yet to publish a report, but announced that Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Rochelle Walensky has agreed to testify on 13 June.

A House divided

The House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic was set up by Democrats in 2020 primarily to investigate the Trump administration's pandemic response and the causes of the high death rate seen in the US. But since Republicans assumed control of the House in January 2023, it has focused on investigating the pandemic's origins.

Its members, more than half of whom are physicians, are bitterly divided. Democrats on the committee argue that its work is harming preparedness for the next pandemic by undermining trust in public health officials and spreading conspiracy theories. They questioned Fauci, who has now retired, about death threats, which he said he still gets regularly, including from two people arrested "on their way to kill me." He later told CNN that when politicians accuse him of causing deaths, "it's like clockwork, the death threats go way up," adding that young people might be discouraged from seeking careers in public health.

Some Republican committee members levelled allegations against Fauci on social media that they declined to follow up in the hearing. The chairman, Brad Wenstrup, wrote last September that he had learnt "that Dr Fauci was escorted into CIA headquarters—without a record of entry—and participated in the analysis to 'influence' the agency's review."

At the 3 June hearing, Fauci ridiculed the claim that he "was parachuted into the CIA like Jason Bourne and told the CIA that they should really not be talking about a lab leak."

"That was not an allegation made by the committee," the Republican staff director told him.

Another committee member, Republican Michael Cloud, alleged on X in January that "while many lost their loved ones, their businesses, and livelihoods, Dr Fauci made millions." But in person he did not contest Fauci's reply that his only coronavirus related income was \$120 a year from an antibody he developed years ago.

Republican Marjorie Taylor Greene, another committee member, charged on X that the pandemic virus "was manufactured in a lab funded by Fauci." At the hearing, she called him "Mr Fauci, because you're not a doctor," saying that he belonged in prison, and told him, "Don't bother answering, because I don't want to hear it."

She was ruled out of order by Wenstrup. Greene and fellow Republican Nicole Malliotakis went on to criticise Fauci for permitting what Malliotakis called “cruel, horrific animal research” at NIH. “I’m puzzled as to what that has to do with the origins of covid,” replied Fauci.

On this subject, he said, he kept an open mind, though he found some laboratory leak theories to be “conspiratorial.” But it was “molecularly impossible,” he argued, that the virus came from experiments funded by the US taxpayer. He acknowledged, however, that he could not be sure what experiments Chinese scientists had later conducted on their own.

Two US intelligence agencies have assessed that the virus escaped from a laboratory, while four others and the National Intelligence Council believe it is natural in origin. None have expressed more than “moderate” confidence in their assessments.

Asked what he had learnt on the subject from yesterday’s hearing, the ranking Democratic member, Raul Ruiz, said, “Not a single thing.”

- 1 Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic. New covid select memo details allegations of wrongdoing and illegal activity by Dr. Fauci’s senior scientific advisor. 22 May 2024. <https://oversight.house.gov/release/new-covid-select-memo-details-allegations-of-wrongdoing-and-illegal-activity-by-dr-faucis-senior-scientific-advisor>
- 2 Department of Health and Human Services. Action referral memorandum: debarment of Dr Peter Daszak. 21 May 2024. https://oversight.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/HHS-SUSP4D-ARM-of-Dr.-Peter-Daszak_05.21.2024_Redacted.pdf
- 3 Democratic Staff Report. Republicans’ Fauci flop: Select Committee’s fifteen month probe fails to find evidence of extreme claims linking Dr Fauci to covid-19’s origins. June 2024. https://oversightdemocrats.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/democrats-oversight.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/SSCP%20Dr.%20Fauci%20Democratic%20Staff%20Report_FINAL.pdf