

Spoken Remarks by Jamie F. Metzl

US House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic

Hearings on “Investigating the Origins of COVID-19”

March 8, 2023

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz, and members of the Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic,

It is my great honor to join you today. We are primarily here because the Chinese government has done everything in its power to prevent the type of investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic that is three years overdue and still urgently required. We are also here because there is more that we in the United States can and must do to push forward, even if China continues to stonewall. This includes establishing a bipartisan US national COVID-19 commission.

I’ve waited more than three years for these hearings to be held. Getting to this point has required a great deal of effort by a small but tireless, self-motivated, and highly capable community of experts from around the world who have refused to be bullied into silence.

Because so many of us have worked so hard for so many years against such ferociously strong headwinds to help lay the groundwork for these hearings, I join you today with a deep and sincere request that your committee honor our work by making these hearings as evidence-based, probing, and solutions-oriented as possible.

Understanding what went wrong and determining how we can do better must be the ultimate bipartisan and nonpartisan issue. I happen to be a Democrat, which is irrelevant to our work together. Since the start of the pandemic, I have been in close contact with officials in the Trump and then Biden administrations and have worked with members of Congress of both parties on the pandemic origins issue.

Although my views are laid out more fully in my written testimony, I’d like to quickly highlight my key points.

First, and most importantly, approximately 20 million people, including over a million Americans, have died as a result of COVID-19. These are our parents, partners, children, relatives, colleagues, and friends. We owe every one of these victims, and ourselves, the fullest possible investigation into how this avoidable tragedy unfolded and our best efforts ensuring that a catastrophe like this never happens again.

Second, while the question of pandemic origins remains open, there can be no doubt that a research-related origin remains a very serious possibility, if not a distinct probability. There is

no “smoking gun” proving a laboratory origin hypothesis, but the growing body of circumstantial evidence suggests a gun that is, at very least, warm to the touch.

Those feeling otherwise also deserve to have their perspectives and research carefully considered. We should all be open to evolving our views as new evidence emerges. Everyone working in good faith to follow the evidence wherever it leads is on the same side. Those working to prevent this type of investigation are not.

Third, it is inconceivable that over three years after this deadly pandemic began, no comprehensive and unfettered investigation into pandemic origins has been carried out nor is one currently planned. This injustice is an insult to every victim of this crisis and a clear threat to future generations.

The primary reason there has been no comprehensive investigation into COVID-19 origins is the reprehensible actions of the Chinese government. Since the early days of the pandemic, China’s government has destroyed samples, hidden records, imprisoned brave Chinese journalists, gagged Chinese scientists, actively spread misinformation, and done pretty much everything possible to prevent the kind of unfettered, evidence-based investigation that is so urgently required. Every person on earth must demand accountability from China.

Calling for a full investigation of pandemic origins in China does not at all mean we shouldn’t carefully examine our own behavior and that of our friends and allies. In fact, we must.

Fourth, although scientific collaboration, including with Chinese scientists, remains critical to building a safer future, we cannot purchase these relationships by our silence. We must at least match the courage of brave Chinese citizens, like Zhang Zhan, who is rotting away in a Chinese prison for asking the same questions many foreigners seem somehow afraid to ask. There is no possible way to establish the principle of transparency and accountability tomorrow without fearlessly and unequivocally establishing that principle today.

Fifth, even if China continues to stonewall, there are critical steps we can and must take in the United States and elsewhere to move this process forward. This includes establishing a bipartisan US national COVID-19 commission to examine the origins issue as well as other failings and shortcomings on the national and international levels and develop bold recommendations for next steps.

Sixth, because the pandemic has taught us, at least I hope, that in our increasingly interconnected world we are all only as safe as the most vulnerable among us, making us more secure here in America requires that we do everything possible to help build a safer world, including by helping upgrade the World Health Organization.

Although some people have criticized the WHO for how it has dealt with the origins issue, it is my view, as outlined in my written testimony, that WHO chief Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has been, in many ways, an unsung hero of this process.

Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz, and members of the subcommittee,

Our world is entering a new era of globalization, where risks are increasing across the board, including the risk of pandemics far deadlier than COVID-19.

If we do not get to the bottom of what went wrong with the COVID-19 pandemic, if we fail in our efforts to fearlessly understand all shortcomings and shore up the vulnerabilities this crisis has so clearly exposed, the victims of the next pandemic -- our children and grandchildren -- will ask us why we failed to protect them when we knew what was at stake and had the chance.

Thank you.