



# WTH really happened at the Wuhan lab? Josh Rogin on the origin of the coronavirus

Episode #45 | April 27, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Josh Rogin

Danielle Pletka: Hi I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On? Marc, what the hell is going on today?

Marc Thiessen: Well what the hell is going on is we're trying to get down to the origin story of where this virus came from. So we are on lockdown. More than 20 million people have lost their jobs in a month. Hundreds of millions of us are sequestered in our homes. We passed \$2.3 trillion in spending to mitigate the effects of this. And we want to know, where did this virus come from and how did it get here? And the fact is, the Chinese government has been lying from the first day, and we've done multiple episodes detailing the lies, covering up this, punishing doctors who try to expose it. And it begs a question, which is, why the cover-up?

Danielle Pletka: Not just why the cover up, but... Because I think the Chinese, let's be fair and say that the Chinese Communist Party's instinct is to cover everything up. Anything that makes the country look bad, anything where there's dissension, anything where there's corruption, right? Their instinct is to cover up. The question here is, the origin story and why they're so desperate? And let's just talk about how desperate they are, okay? Everybody who has been involved in this has been disappeared, disciplined, shuttered for reeducation. The genome itself was disappeared until the Chinese government was finally forced to release its sequencing, but even then, we don't have the actual, original genome of the disease. We just have their transmission, their facts. And this has, of course, become a huge political football, right? Tom Cotton got involved right up front and said, "I think the Chinese government is to fault." Everybody landed on him, and now it's become a football between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. So I think the question is, did it come from that disgusting wet market that you and I talked about?

Marc Thiessen: Yeah, so that's the interesting thing because true, China is a communist totalitarian dictatorship and so they do naturally cover things up. So that's one possible explanation. But the extent of the cover-up is so vast that it makes you wonder whether it's just that. And the reality is, look, if a naturally occurring accident in nature caused a viral outbreak that China was unable to control, no one would blame Beijing for that. That happens, right? I mean it happened with the SARS virus.

Danielle Pletka: Happened with Ebola, happened with MERS.

Marc Thiessen: It happens all around the world. It's not necessarily a reflection on China that it

happened in China and that it spread around the world and the world wanted to, immediately as soon as word started leaking out, we wanted to send CDC researchers to Beijing. They said no. We said, "Can we get copies of the sample so that we can start working on testing and help?" They said no. The world wanted to help China, and they covered it up. So why is that? The origin story of this is that it happened in the wet market, and that origin story is kind of falling apart.

Danielle Pletka:

And that's not just me and Marc saying that. The Lancet, which is really the British medical journal of record, had a big piece in which it said, "It's very, very hard to make the case because there's absolutely no evidence to make the case."

Marc Thiessen:

Yeah. The first person who's documented as having it had no connection with the market. We know it's a bat coronavirus. So how did it get to humans? It had to have some intermediary host at the wet market. They haven't been able to identify the intermediary host.

Danielle Pletka:

And again, there's some really good scientific articles about this, both in [Scientific American](#) and also on a site called [Live Science](#), really interesting if you want to dive deeper into this.

Marc Thiessen:

And we'll link to them in the transcript. So the idea that this came from the wet market is a theory. One that everybody accepted immediately. "Well it had to have come from the wet market." This is where SARS came from originally, so we just accepted this as the theory. And there's a competing theory that's coming out that's gained a lot of traction, which is that this came from a Chinese lab. Not that it was a bio weapon. There's a lot of conspiracy theories saying "The Chinese were engineering this bio weapon and released it onto the world." Or that it got out. No. There were labs in Wuhan, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and also China's CDC had a lab that was only 300 yards away from the market, where they were studying bat coronavirus. And so the possibility is that this virus escaped from that lab, either because a worker got sick and took it out with him, or bad sanitation and biohazard waste disposal, or some other way. There's no more evidence of that than there is of the...

Danielle Pletka:

Wet market.

Marc Thiessen:

Of the wet market, but these are competing theories that have a lot of traction. And if that were the case, it would explain why China is so desperate to cover this up from the very beginning. If they knew it came from the lab, that would add a layer of their culpability because a lab accident, they could be held accountable for that.

Danielle Pletka:

Right. And of course I think in this case, even more interesting, the Chinese government's not just looking out to the world, not just looking for the blame that they're hearing on American cable stations and in this conversation, but they're looking internally. That this could actually undermine Xi Jinping's rule because in fact the Chinese people have, despite the lies about the numbers, they know that the Chinese people have suffered disproportionately. That there have been deaths. That there has been illness. That their economy is now, for the first time, contracting. And so Xi Jinping wants to skirt the blame. I saw that the head of security for Hubei province, the guy who was in charge of locking down Wuhan, has just been arrested by China's anti-corruption commission.

Marc Thiessen:

There you go.

- Danielle Pletka: Coincidence? I don't think so.
- Marc Thiessen: No that's exactly right. So, we've got a great guest to come on to talk about this. Our friend Josh Rogin, who for loyal listeners, you've heard him on this podcast before, wrote a great story in the Washington Post where he went and actually talked to a lot of scientists and dug deep into this theory that it might've come from one of the labs.
- Danielle Pletka: And he got hold of two classified State Department cables that actually talked about State Department concerns that this lab's security procedures were not adequate, and in fact specifically said that the virus could escape from that lab and infect people and cause a pandemic. So real prescience on the part of whoever wrote those cables, and in fact Josh talks about all of the details of that. So, again, Josh's bio, all of you know him all too well, but Josh is a columnist for the Global Opinions section of the Washington Post. He's a political analyst with CNN. He's written foreign policy and natural security for Bloomberg, for Newsweek, for the Daily Beast, for Foreign Policy. I could keep going for quite a while. He's a terrific journalist, he's a really good investigator and we're lucky to have him.
- Marc Thiessen: Well Josh, welcome back to the podcast.
- Josh Rogin: Great to be with you from home.
- Marc Thiessen: You've got some really fancy equipment over there. Everybody else we're doing is on telephone. It sounds like they're calling from China, but you sound like you're right in here with us. It's awesome.
- Josh Rogin: Yeah well I saved a lot of money on traveling to visit family, so I invested it in microphone equipment.
- Marc Thiessen: Well you've had a great column in the Post recently, because the conventional wisdom about how this pandemic started is that there was an infection that jumped from animal to human in the seafood market in Wuhan, and [you](#) and [David Ignatius](#) have both written that that story has become increasingly shaky and that there's an alternative theory. Can you tell us about it?
- Josh Rogin: Right. So, even the Chinese government isn't repeating the Wuhan seafood market origin theory the way they were a couple of months ago for a few pretty obvious reasons. I mean one is that in February a bunch of Chinese researchers published a study in The Lancet showing that a lot of the first cluster of cases, including the first known one, had nothing to do with the market. It was some old guy who lived really far from the market, he didn't know about the market, and of course the Chinese government subsequently shut down all research about the origin of the virus, but we can get to that later. As it turns out, the market didn't have bats, it's not clear it had pangolins if you believe the pangolin theory. And it just seemed like all of a sudden there was just silence on the Chinese side about this whole market theory.
- Josh Rogin: So as that started to seem less and less plausible, more people inside the government began to look at other options, and of course 300 yards down the road is the Wuhan Center for Disease and Control and Prevention Laboratory, and another 20 miles down the road is the Wuhan Institute of Virology. They both study bat coronaviruses and their transmission to humans potentially, so it seemed like a

logical place to look. And as this was happening some people inside the government started circulating this 2018 cable, actually two cables, that US Embassy officials in Beijing had written when they visited the Wuhan Institute of Virology and been so shocked by what they saw as lax safety standards and the danger of the way that they were dealing with bat coronaviruses that they sent back what they said were warning shots. They were begging people to take a look at this lab and actually give it more funding and more support so that they could fix their safety problems.

Josh Rogin: Those calls for assistance were never answered, but now that the Wuhan market story seems ridiculous, all of a sudden people inside the administration are taking another look at these labs and they've sent the intelligence community on the task of finding evidence and proof to confirm what these cables predicted, which was that a SARS-like pandemic would emerge out of the city of Wuhan having something to do with bat coronavirus. They put that in the cable. I mean it's in the cable and it happened. And the scientific community, by the way, in the last week since I published that article, has just been all over the place. I've got dozens if not hundreds of emails from scientists saying, "That's ridiculous. That's outrageous. I knew those scientists personally. They're lovely people. They would never do such a thing." And then I've got an equal number of scientists emailing me like, "Oh no you're on to something. It definitely was a lab accident. We got to check it out."

Josh Rogin: And so all the scientists, kind of like all the journalists and all the think tank experts, are 100% sure they're right, but they all disagree with each other all the time. And this has been thrust into the foreign, also become part of a political fight between the Trump administration and the Biden campaign, and we can get into that too. But anyway, long story short, we don't know where the virus came from. We need to know where the virus came from. It's critical scientific information for determining how we fight the pandemic and for preventing the next one, which will surely come.

Marc Thiessen: It's important at the start to disaggregate two different things, which is, there seems to be no evidence that this was a bio weapon, which is what a lot of scientists have been pushing back on. There is a study that showed that this had to be naturally occurring. What the theory is is that this may have come out of a lab where they were studying a naturally occurring virus and that it could've been a lab accident, it could've been a worker who got infected, it could've been basically a lab failure. Is that right, that we're not talking about a bio weapon?

Josh Rogin: Yes. Because I think the serious discussion about the origin of the novel coronavirus pandemic has been corrupted and really distorted by this bio weapon thing because the people who are saying it was definitely a bio weapon don't have any evidence to support that. And the people who are attacking that theory are often using it as a strawman to say it didn't come from the lab at all, when in fact if you forget about the bio weapon thing... Because from what we can see about the virus, it doesn't seem possible that that's the case, it's not the way a bio weapon would be constructed. Plus this lab was publishing prolifically for years. So under what circumstance, if you were building a secret bio weapon, would you publish everything all over the world? It's the opposite of what you would do if you would build a bio weapon. So it doesn't really make any sense on its face.

Danielle Pletka: So Josh, I just want to dive in a little bit into this question of the lab itself, because I think that's really important. It's also, at the end of the day, what generated the cables, which generated your story. So, this is a Chinese virology and bio research lab. It's at this BSL4, bio research safety level four, can you just talk about the basics

of that for a second? Just to sort of orientate people around what we are talking about at that very basic level.

Josh Rogin: First of all there are several labs. There's Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is the premiere bat coronavirus lab, probably in the world, definitely in China. And for years and years and years, they've been trying to basically prevent the next SARS-like pandemic by working with all sorts of people and organizations, including a bunch of Americans, to collect bats all over China, mostly in southern Yunnan province, figure out what viruses they were holding and then figuring out if you mix and play with those viruses and put them in animals, what can we learn about how they might transmit to animals? What does that tell us about how they might transmit to humans? And this was generally agreed in the scientific and international community to be important work, but also dangerous and risky work. They also collaborated with a team at UNC, which was doing what we call gain of function research. This didn't happen in Wuhan, this happened in North Carolina, but what they would do is they would make the viruses more virulent and more deadly and more contagious in order to see how that might occur by trying to speed up the evolutionary process in their lab. And that was also very risky. That's another story. Then you got the Wuhan CDC lab, which is a different lab in Wuhan. They've got a PLA bio lab, which...

Danielle Pletka: People's Liberation Army.

Josh Rogin: Yeah. So there's lots of labs and lots of scientists doing lots of science all the time, which is supposed to be good. We were funding a lot of this research through the NIH, the Ecohealth Alliance, through the USA's Predict program, and even after I wrote this article I've been talking to scientists every day and just learning about what was going on in this lab, and almost all the scientists say the same thing. They're like, "These are super nice people who were just trying to prevent us from having another pandemic, and we can't believe that this would possibly be the case that it would escape from this lab and we're pretty sure that it was a natural occurrence." But it sort of gets you all the way back to this unsolved question, which is two questions actually. One is, okay then what are they covering up? Because the lab has been silent. All the research has been suppressed. All the people who knew anything have been disappeared. It's a full-scale Chinese Communist Party coverup. So if there's nothing to find, what are they covering up? That's the first thing.

Josh Rogin: And then the second thing is, okay if you want to argue that it was a natural occurrence, in other words an animal got bit by a bat or a human got bit by a bat. Who knows? Maybe the virus bounced around in a bunch of humans for a while. You would have to believe that that happened 300 feet from the lab by pure coincidence. That of all the bats in all of the caves in all of the...

Danielle Pletka: Wait I feel a line from Casablanca coming on.

Josh Rogin: I keep asking these scientists who are 100% sure, and there's an argument for it. All of the pandemics we've seen before have been spillovers that happened in nature. On the other hand, viruses escape from labs all the time. SARS escaped from a lab in Beijing at least four times that we know about. So you get six scientists, you get 10 different opinions. But the bottom line is to believe that it had nothing to do with the lab, you have to believe that the one time in a trillion chance that the worst virus we've ever seen that's killing the most people we've ever seen, emerged at the exact spot, literally the exact spot, that all of these bat coronavirus immunology and

viral experimentation labs just happened to be at. And that's a leap of faith that I can't quite get over. And that's not the same thing as having evidence, but it means that we have to figure it out, and we have to convince Beijing to let us in there.

Josh Rogin: Let's say it is a natural occurrence. We could prove that too. You know how you do that, according to the scientists? You go to Wuhan, you start scooping up bats. This is what they do. They collect all the bats. And what if we found it in a bat in a cave 10 miles from Wuhan? Well the Chinese government would be vindicated. You would think that would want to do that, right? They bleached that market. Remember that market we were talking about? Two days later they went through the whole thing and just covered it in anti-septic. It's the opposite of what you would do if you thought that the evidence to vindicate your country from making the world sick was in that market. The last thing you'd do is soak it in bleach.

Danielle Pletka: Okay. So two quick questions. One is technical and the other is just about creating this nexus with the lab. So the first thing is, I know that in researching, just to talk to you I was fascinated by the fact that these bio research safety levels, the BSLs, and this was a BSL level four lab, that in fact there's no enforcement on this ranking at all. It's used in conjunction with the World Health Organization. There's a manual from the World Health Organization, which lists the different levels, but in fact if Marc and I decide that we're going to go back to our house and create a BSL level four research lab, people may not credit our research, but there's actually no enforcements of that standard at all.

Josh Rogin: You're not wrong. Here's what I would say. In the Wuhan Institute of Virology, they have a bunch of different labs. One is the BSL four lab. Now, a lot of the bat coronavirus work wouldn't have happened in that lab anyway, and at the CDC lab, which is BSL level two, which was described to me by one administration official as better than high school, not as good as undergrad. They were also doing bat coronavirus research. So there's some of it that you don't need to do in a BSL four lab, but most of the stuff that USAID and NIH was doing with these guys and this one particular team led by Shi Zhengli, who they call the bat woman, most of that did not have to be done in a BSL four lab.

Marc Thiessen: Maybe it should have been.

Josh Rogin: Well yeah you could say that. But I mean a lot of people are going to listen to this and I want to make sure that we're being precise here because I'm not in a position to judge the science and the exact standards. Most of this is circumstantial evidence that points to a need to find out answers by letting international and independent inspectors into these labs and talk to these scientists and see what they were doing. So this is a long way of saying, we don't know what was going in that BSL four lab. Were they doing some of the more risky experiments? I don't know. We should find out, right? The work that the USAID and the NIH people were doing was at a lower classification level. It seems like maybe that was appropriate based on the standard operating procedures or whatever, but it doesn't mean that an accident couldn't have taken place, right? And accidents happen all the time as it turns out. In our system, that's something that scientists don't like to admit, but imagine you're living in the Chinese Communist Party system. Are you going to be the guy who goes to the local party official and says, "Listen we had some leak at the lab." No, I mean you'll die. They'll disappear you. It'll be the end, right?

Josh Rogin: I mean [inaudible] said in an interview, she bets her life it didn't come out of the lab.

Well yeah. I bet she does bet her life because in her system, you don't get to make a mistake like that. So, people get concerned with BSL four. It seemed like there was a problem with working their BSL four lab. We don't have any evidence that's connected to this. We don't know what was going on inside that BSL four lab. We do know that they were playing around with a lot of bat coronaviruses in a lot of different ways for a lot of different projects. And by the way, this is some new information, I heard that they're going to come out with a list, like Wuhan Institute of Virology has been super secret and silent recently other than to deny that they had anything to do with it. So they're preparing to make some sort of transparency disclosure that they will present to us as vindication. Well okay. That's a step, but it just shows you that they're now acknowledging that they have to tell us more about what the heck they were up to.

Danielle Pletka: So my second question was on the exculpatory side. Okay, so what we're saying now is, yes we have absolutely no evidence that the first people who were diagnosed with what we were then calling the Wuhan virus, had any nexus with the market and that in fact it comes from bats but there were no bats at that market. It may have come from pangolins. There may not even be pangolins at that market. Do we have, or have you seen or heard about any information that creates a nexus between the lab and the first sufferers of the virus?

Josh Rogin: No. There's no firm evidence connecting it to the lab, and it's a really important question and a really important point to make, connecting any of the labs, frankly, to the initial patients of the initial outbreak. I mean, of course, some people say the CDC lab is literally 300 feet from the market, that presents some sort of evidence, but actual scientific evidence is still lacking. And as you went through that litany, I couldn't help remembering all these conversations I've been having with all these scientists, and they're all over the map. They all disagree with each other. They all have extensive resumes and litanies of pieces of paper that say they're qualified to know exactly how bat coronaviruses work. But I've found no consensus. And there are scientists who will swear up and down that it could've gone straight from the bats to the humans. And there are others who will say "No that's totally impossible." There are some who will say it definitely could've come from the market. There are some who say it definitely came from the lab. I don't know. How are we supposed to tell? We have a whole US intelligence community looking for that information right now and coming up empty.

Josh Rogin: But again, you have to keep coming back to the reason why. Why are we having this conversation? Why don't we know? Isn't it important? Aren't people dying every single day including today in our country and countries all over the world because we don't have this information? And it's because the Chinese government is intentionally withholding it as part of a broad campaign of controlling the narrative and withholding all sorts of scientific information. They released the genome of the novel coronavirus that we're dealing with, but the lab that did that did it against the government's wishes and was shuttered the next day for "rectification." The original samples, which is the thing I hear from scientists a lot these days, is the earliest cases had samples. Actual samples of the virus. Those could be different than the samples that we're collecting from people in New Jersey today because the virus is constantly moving around and mutating, but those samples hold key information and they won't give them to us. And we keep asking them and they won't explain why they won't give them to us. Wouldn't we want to know?

Josh Rogin: If you're a skeptic of this theory that the lab was involved, you have to get over that

hurdle of answering why it is that there's this massive, massive effort from the Chinese government to say, "Oh no you can only look through the keys under the lamp post. If they're not under the lamp post I don't know what to tell you." That's their stance.

Marc Thiessen: Well I want to get to the broader coverup in a second, but I mean people are saying, "Oh well this is just a theory. It hasn't been proven. There's no direct evidence." And all the rest of it. That's true.

Josh Rogin: That's true.

Marc Thiessen: But isn't that also true of the seafood market theory? There's the first known patient, according to The Lancet, had no connection to the market. They didn't sell bats. The bats come from a cave 1,000 miles away in Yunnan province. And they also haven't identified an intermediate host between the bat and the humans. So, is there any more credence to the seafood market theory than there is to the lab theory?

Josh Rogin: I think the seafood market theory is looking less and less plausible. There's a third theory, which is one of the doctors...

Danielle Pletka: The grassy knoll?

Josh Rogin: Right. The theory basically goes something like this: Forget about the seafood market. Some bat or wildlife that got bitten by a bat was trafficked into the city of Wuhan or came from the city of Wuhan and transferred over into humans through a random natural occurrence as has happened in the past, and it had nothing to do with the lab and nothing to do with the market. And the way to check that theory, as I said before, is to swarm into Wuhan and collect all the pangolins and bats and see which ones has which virus, right? And that work is not going on. So even if you wanted to prove that it wasn't from the lab, there's a way to do it that's not happening. And I can't sit here and adjudicate between all of these scientists because they all disagree with each other. All I can say is that inside the US government there's an intelligence gap. There's an intelligence gap because the Chinese government is thwarting our ability to learn, intentionally, what the heck happened.

Marc Thiessen: What the hell happened? Excuse me.

Josh Rogin: I was afraid I was going to have to pay you royalty if I said it that way.

Marc Thiessen: We've got an explicit rating you can use whatever language you want.

Danielle Pletka: He doesn't want to take our intellectual property.

Marc Thiessen: Oh okay. Unlike the Chinese.

Josh Rogin: So we've got to get to the bottom of this. I don't see any other way around it, and I don't see any other way the battle of scientists and experts is going to be resolved until we check out one of these two theories. Collect all the bats in Wuhan, get into that lab. Let's do both. How about that? Let's check out both of these theories. I'm curious.



- Marc Thiessen: So let's get back to the coverup because I think it's really an interesting question because the fact is they haven't just covered up the details of the lab. They were covering up the whole outbreak from day one. The first case was in late November. They denied until mid-January that there was even human-to-human transmission. If this had been just a natural occurrence, no one would blame China for a natural outbreak that was beyond their control. So it strikes me that... Why would they go to so much extent to deny that it was happening, even in the early stages when the US government was asking for samples and trying to send CDC emergency personnel to help with them, that they just complete lockdown from the very beginning of the outbreak? Now that could just be how totalitarian regimes operate, but it strikes me that they would have an interest in covering it up if there was some direct government culpability in the outbreak.
- Josh Rogin: Right. Marc, I think you're asking the perfect question and I think you also just answered it. Is that, this is how the Chinese Communist Party acts because this is its character because in China there's no bad news. And in China, if you're the local official you don't report bad news to the news, you don't report it up to the senior official until it's absolutely necessary. And if you're the senior official you don't report it up to the next official until it's absolutely necessary. Now that's not to say that our government functioned like a well-oiled machine in the first two months of this coronavirus, but it's a false equivalence, right? If you tried to compare the debate and politicization of coronavirus inside our administration and inside our politics, which I hope we'll talk about because I think it's fascinating fits into this China question.
- Josh Rogin: It's totally different than doctors sneaking information out in the world and literally getting jailed or disappeared or tortured or killed for it. It's different than journalists in China, the Chinese ones being intimidated or jailed or disappeared, and the American ones just being kicked out of the country all together. It's different than a city of Wuhan, where people are staging these mass-protests and sometimes silent protests to honor these martyrs who they believe sacrificed and died to help the public save itself from its own government, which is oppressive and repressive and just awful in so many ways. And then much later, there was a huge, of course, shift in Beijing to an overreaction and some draconian measures, and we could debate their success. And that's not even talking about them hiding all of the death numbers and the actual statistics, which again...
- Marc Thiessen: And they still are.
- Josh Rogin: So there's something fundamental here that you're touching on, which is that we have this debate over US-China relations and shouldn't we cooperate with China and isn't it important to cooperate with China? Of course that's a true and a meaningless statement at the same time, because we can only cooperate with China to the extent that they're willing to cooperate with us, and it only benefits us if they cooperate with us on the basis of the things that we need, which are basic transparency, accountability, factual truth telling, public health information. I mean, think about it. If we can't cooperate with them on a pandemic, and again I don't think we're blameless but I think they deserve the lion's share of the blame, what can we cooperate on? How does that work? How does it work when they have a virus that they know is coming to get us, and they lie about it and then our citizens and our economy and our public health system is all suffering, and to this day we still can't get them to deal honestly with us. That's a fundamental break. I don't see how we get past it.

- Danielle Pletka: So I want to make a bridge to exactly what you suggested, which is that it's worth talking about the politicization of the virus. And obviously, the Trump administration has contributed its own efforts in that direction as usual, but one of the things that's been interesting to me is the assistance program that you also wrote about, which is that the Wuhan lab has received money from AID, from the US government and from a whole variety of different sources, which some people are taking to suggest that in fact the US is somehow complicit in what's happened, because A, didn't we know? And B, weren't we giving them money? It reminded me a little bit of when I left the US government and the US government was talking about the illegal Pakistani nuclear weapons program, and how insecure it was and how at risk it was from Islamist extremists. And so the US government made a tough decision to actually go in and help on security for an illegal nuclear weapons program. Does that make us complicit with the Pakistani illegal weapons program? I don't think it does, but perhaps people have more to understand about US assistance.
- Danielle Pletka: What did you learn? Really long question. Sorry.
- Josh Rogin: No, no, no. I think it's two really good questions. The politicization and are we complicit. So, what's fascinating is that in the cables from 2018, the US diplomats, the health officials and science officials from the embassy, were calling on the United States government and organizations to give the Wuhan lab more money and more support. Because they knew that that was the only way that they would reach the level of safety and security that would allow them to do this important work and continue to do it. The theory of the case for ten years, ever since we got past SARs and decided how to institutionally prepare for the next pandemic was, to forward deploy these resources. Most SARs-like viruses come out of China. It makes sense to put the lab in China and start collecting bats in China. And we dedicated \$200 million to that idea, at least, and spent 10 years doing it, and then just abandoned it two months before the pandemic.
- Josh Rogin: So it's an easy headline to say, "Oh we were complicit in building up this lab." And you could certainly make an argument that maybe we shouldn't have built a lab in China in the first place, but in 2018, no the right move would've been to support this lab and have more involvement, more transparency, and more safety there. So no I don't think we're complicit. I think, actually, we ignored this problem and cut off the aid for pandemic prevention at exactly the wrong time. And guess what? We got a pandemic out of it. So I think that was pretty stupid on our part.
- Josh Rogin: Now when it comes to the politicization of the coronavirus issues, I think there's plenty of blame to go around. And first it was Biden calling the travel bans xenophobic. And then it was Trump calling Biden weak on China. Now it's Biden calling Trump weak on China. And it's in the Congress as well. I remember this bill that they had with Jim Banks, and it was to blame the Chinese Communist Party for the spread of the pandemic. And Seth Moulton, centrist Democrat, signed on. He was the only Democratic co-sponsor, and he got raked over the coals by his own party and his primary challenger and they called him racist and everything else in the book. And he withdrew his support. So even on the issue of whether or not we should assign the responsibility of this to the Chinese Communist Party, that has become hyper-politicized and weaponized by everybody. I think that's a really corrosive and terrible trend that we should be avoiding.
- Josh Rogin: I wrote a [column](#) about a week ago about the polling. The polling shows that Americans, Democrats and Republicans, pretty much see through both the US

political spin and the Chinese Communist Party propaganda. They understand the open source information and that this likely came from China and the Chinese government has been definitely covering it up. And that's a huge problem that has implications for them as they sit in their homes and they can't visit grandma. And so in Washington we just can't resist weaponizing this, but that's exactly what the Chinese Communist Party wants. They want to divide and conquer. They want all China hawks to be called racist and all anti-Chinese Communist Party efforts to be termed anti-Chinese. And so we have to consciously take a moment of pause in our crazy Washington bubble here and say to each other, "Hey listen, in the fight for our public health and our national security and the push to make China and the Chinese government behave better, we're all on that side. We're all on the same side." And that's really important. I think that's getting lost.

Marc Thiessen: What I worry about, Josh, is that the narrative, and this is my final question, is that the narrative in Washington has become that Trump is trying to scapegoat China in order to divert attention from his own failures. And so therefore, the media is not going to want to pursue the China angle because it's perceived as helping Trump in that scapegoating. The New York Times actually had a story on the [front page](#) on Sunday that literally said that Republicans are trying to scapegoat China. And first of all, the premise of that is just ridiculous. The idea that if China is the arsonist that set this fire, and the fire brigade was late to the game, that doesn't absolve the arsonist. You're not scapegoating the arsonist who set the fire. They're two different things. So, is this a problem we face now in Washington that everything is so politicized that there's going to be a resistance to actually put the blame where it resides in China?

Josh Rogin: Yes. I mean, listen, I think there's an element of truth to all of the arguments. There is a tendency... I mean not all people who are anti-CCP are anti-China, but some of them are. Not all media are pro-China, they're just mostly lazy and not used to writing about the nature of the Chinese Communist Party. The Trump administration can be correct when it blames China and also abusing it for its political purposes. I mean if you watch those ads, right? It's gratuitous and it's unnecessary and we have to be honest about that. So, yes, China is on balance to blame for the fact that I have to sit in my house and I can't see my parents for a year. I feel angry about that as an American. I don't blame Joe Biden for that, okay? And I certainly don't blame the media for that.

Josh Rogin: I think we can hold two thoughts in our head, that we have to understand that the culpability here needs to be assigned and then dealt with, and it has to be part of our overall approach to US-China relations. And everybody in Washington can take a deep breath and say, "Okay listen. Let's just try for a second not to weaponize this and distort it for our own short-term political or financial gain because that distracts us from the larger issue."

Danielle Pletka: Yeah well it would be nice if everybody behaved like grown ups. So exit question. You've done all of this research. You've heard from scientists who love you, scientists who hate you, scientists who think you know everything and scientists who think you're a complete freaking idiot.

Marc Thiessen: Who's right?

Danielle Pletka: No. What do you think, in talking to your sources inside the US government, what do you think the prospects are for a good and definitive understanding of this from the US intelligence community?

- Josh Rogin: I think the prospects are low. I think there's a signals intelligence gap, is what I'm hearing. Our human intelligence networks in China are not what they used to be and not what they should be. There's definitely an effort by the Chinese government to thwart our signals collecting related to Wuhan labs, which is interesting. It's not evidence but it's certainly interesting. I think that they're not going to let us find the smoking gun. If they found it, they destroyed it or buried it or jailed it. If they didn't find it, they're hunting for it and then they're going to destroy it, bury it or jail it. They may never let us find the smoking gun. We may never find it. Okay? They would be derelict if they let us find it. So, we'll always have this doubt. And it's a huge problem, and it's a petri dish for conspiracy theories in every direction.
- Josh Rogin: But, that doesn't change what we have to do. The mission is the same, which is to press for more transparency, accountability, more information, real data, real science. And guess what, to all the scientists out there who didn't like my article? I have no interest in how this comes out. If it turns out it was the one in a trillion bat that just happened to be 300 feet from the lab? Okay. I'm fine with that. But there's no argument for drawing a conclusion that it definitely didn't come from the lab or it definitely did until we have the ability to get in there and to find out. And that may require a lot of pressure from the US government, and whether or not the US government has the intent or capability, frankly, to exert that pressure and get to these answers is yet to be determined.
- Danielle Pletka: You have done amazing work on this. This was super interesting. Thank you so much for joining us again. We're really grateful.
- Josh Rogin: Thank you.
- Danielle Pletka: So, Josh really didn't disappoint. He's done amazing work on this. I'm looking forward to seeing his next piece as well. But, it is amazing to me how quickly this went from being a story about a virus that originated in China to being the object of competing political commercials from the Trump and Biden campaigns.
- Marc Thiessen: Josh called them gratuitous ads. I don't know if it's so gratuitous. The fact is that China is to blame, that the vast majority of Americans do blame China, both Republicans and Democrats, for this virus. And this narrative that has emerged in the media that any effort to call out China, any effort to place the blame on Beijing, "You're just trying to distract from Donald Trump's failures. Donald Trump is responsible for this virus, not the Chinese government. And so you're playing into Donald Trump's hands." And the reality is that two things can be true. Which is that one, China is responsible for the virus. And two, the Trump administration didn't respond as well or as quickly as we would've wanted them to. And the analogy that I used with the arsonist... An arsonist sets a fire, if the fire brigade doesn't come fast enough that doesn't mean the arsonist didn't set the fire.
- Danielle Pletka: No that's absolutely true. But the central thrust of these competing commercials has been who's soft on China? With Biden saying Trump's soft on China and Trump's people saying Biden's soft on China. The funny thing...
- Marc Thiessen: Well one is right and one is wrong.
- Danielle Pletka: Uh-uh. I don't agree with that. There was a very interesting piece in the New York Times, I think over the weekend, in fact I think it was on the front page, that said the Trump administration's conclusion is they need to be tough on China. There's only

one problem with that. Donald Trump isn't necessarily with the program. And I agree about that. That guy goes back and forth. "Xi Jinping is my friend. I think they've done a good job." I can pull the news clips for you.

- Marc Thiessen: Oh good. Thanks. Like I haven't seen them elsewhere. I mean the fact that he says nice things about Xi Jinping doesn't mean that he's not tough on China. He's been tougher on China than any president, including my former boss, including Barack Obama, than any president in our lifetime.
- Danielle Pletka: But you agree that it sends a mixed message, don't you?
- Marc Thiessen: You need to stop focusing so much on Donald Trump's praise of dictators who he's negotiating with. It's part of his negotiating technique is that he praises these guys. But the reality is that he did shut down air travel with China in late January, which Dr. Fauci, who's judgment...
- Danielle Pletka: Who's a newly found saint, I believe.
- Marc Thiessen: Exactly. Except when he defends Trump, in which case they ask him in the briefing, "Are you saying that of your own free will?" Which is just ridiculous. Fauci said that probably saved hundreds of thousands of lives. And guess what? Joe Biden, when that came out, said "That's xenophobic." If Joe Biden was the president during this crisis, we would not have shut down travel. Nancy Pelosi went to Chinatown in mid-February, February 24, and said, "There's no danger here. Everybody come to Chinatown." There's lots of blame to go around on the response. None of it, whether it's Biden or Pelosi or Trump, none of that absolves Beijing.
- Danielle Pletka: Look I agree with you that none of this should move away from the central responsibility of the Chinese Communist government and I hear what you're saying on the question of Trump and his unbelievably generous view of pretty much every dictator he ever meets. I understand that that can be perceived as a negotiating tactic, but I do think that it complicates it. And just from a purely political standpoint, you just quoted Joe Biden saying "xenophobic," which was a stupid thing to say. And just as easily, we can take Donald Trump at face value gushing on about Xi Jinping.
- Marc Thiessen: Except that Trump shut down travel with China.
- Danielle Pletka: Yes. But we're talking politics now. And that's the challenge, is, as we move away from the coronavirus, God willing, and we start into the full presidential campaign season, this is what's going to be going back and forth is...
- Marc Thiessen: I don't think we're going to move away from the coronavirus, it's going to be central to the presidential campaign. And we'll have plenty of time to debate that on this podcast and in columns and everything like that, but what worries me is that we need to hold China responsible for what it did. The reason we are locked in our homes right now is not because Joe Biden was soft on China. It's not because Donald Trump failed to act as fast as we would've liked him to. It's because China knew in December that this was capable of human-to-human transmission, and didn't fess up until late January about that. And didn't share virus samples, so we couldn't get testing going. And didn't allow CDC people to come in and help them because they were...

Danielle Pletka: And sanitized the Wuhan market.

Marc Thiessen: And sanitized the Wuhan market. You just needed that to find out where the virus was coming from, and may have in fact, this may have been a laboratory leak. And we need to hold them... The reason why more than 20 million Americans are out of work is because of that. And stop blaming Donald Trump for that. And stop blaming American politicians and even stop blaming our bureaucracy that screwed up. China is responsible for this, and we need to hold them to account.

Danielle Pletka: Well, I'm sorry we are the richest, most developed, most powerful country in the world. I expect us to perform just a little bit better than my expectations of the Communist Chinese. So, folks, you can hear... Marc and I are going to continue fighting long after we get off the air, but we are setting ourselves up for our next podcast so do be sure that you tune in. We're going to be talking about whether we can sue China for its responsibility for the coronavirus. This is going to be super interesting. But for the meantime, stay safe, stay distanced. I'll just say this for Marc, especially from Dany, and thanks for listening.

Marc Thiessen: Thanks for listening.

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