

EXCLUSIVE: Classified study found COVID-19 could have originated in Chinese lab

by JAMES ROSEN, The National Desk | Monday, May 3rd 2021

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In this Sunday, Feb. 16, 2020, photo, medical workers move a person who died from COVID-19 at a hospital in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province. (Chinatopix via AP)

WASHINGTON (SBG) - A classified study of the origin of SARS-CoV-2 conducted a year ago by scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, the Department of Energy's premier biodefense research institution, concluded the novel coronavirus at the heart of the current pandemic may have originated in a laboratory in China, Sinclair has learned.

Researchers at Livermore's "Z Division," the lab's intelligence unit, issued the report May 27, 2020, classified "Top Secret." Its existence is previously undisclosed. The Z Division report assessed that both the lab-origin theory and the zoonotic theory were plausible and warranted further investigation. Sinclair has not reviewed the report but confirmed its contents through interviews with multiple sources who read it or were briefed on its contents.

In an email to Sinclair, a Livermore spokesperson confirmed the existence of the report but declined to provide additional information. "Because the report you are referring to is classified," wrote Lynda Seaver, director of public affairs, "it would be inappropriate for our lab to discuss this."

Avril Haines, the new director of national intelligence, testified earlier this month that the U.S. intelligence community is actively investigating both theories. "We just don't know exactly

where, when, and how the coronavirus was transmitted initially,” Haines told the House intelligence committee on April 15.

“We have two plausible theories that we are working on that components within the intelligence community have essentially coalesced around. One of them is that it was a laboratory accident, and the other is that it emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals.”

Haines added that Chinese leaders “have not been forthcoming through this process,” and that U.S. analysis “is not based on an assumption that what they say is true.”

If the U.S. intelligence community has not been able to discount either theory, nor have the medical or scientific communities produced any consensus as to which theory is correct.

The zoonotic theory, advanced by China and the World Health Organization, holds that an animal, most likely a bat, infected the first human with COVID-19, or infected an intermediate host, such as another animal, that subsequently infected the first human. This theory has focused on the “wet” markets of Wuhan, the crowded bazaar of fish, meats, and frozen foods where roughly one-third of the first 174 known cases of COVID-19 had links.

Researchers believe coronaviruses, first identified in the 1960s, have probably afflicted humans for centuries, albeit with milder symptoms than those associated with more recent strains. Deadlier coronavirus outbreaks occurred in 2002-2003 (SARS) and 2012 (MERS). The coronavirus in the current pandemic, COVID-19, is formally known as SARS-CoV-2.

The lab-origin theory is predicated on the fact that the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) – located, like the wet markets, in the central Chinese city that was the epicenter of the outbreak – has long been at the forefront of China’s research on bat coronaviruses.

According to a “fact sheet” released by the State Department on January 15, WIV personnel work closely with the Chinese military and have conducted experiments involving RaTG13, the bat coronavirus with the closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2 percent). The lab has also published findings from “gain-of-function” research, which is aimed at increasing the transmissibility of viruses among humans.

This area of scientific activity, experts told Sinclair, carries a “dual-use”: It supports the development of new vaccines and therapeutics but can also be used in covert biological- and chemical-weapons programs, which China is suspected of maintaining. The State Department fact sheet said China is working “to engineer chimeric viruses.” In its 2021 report, issued this month, the State Department’s Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance (AVC) said the “dual-use applications” of China’s scientific research “raise concerns about its compliance with Article I” of the Biological Weapons Convention enacted in 1975, to which China is a signatory. That article prohibits member states from pursuing biological weapons.

The “dual use” of gain-of-function research has in turn divided proponents of the lab-origin theory into two main camps. Both believe SARS-CoV-2 accidentally “leaked” from WIV

personnel, but one camp attributes the accident to legitimate medical research, the other to prohibited biological-weapons research.

Analysts said the State Department's claim of a close working relationship between WIV and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese military, was well founded. "Any sort of institution that works on matters that could be construed as relating to national security – which the Wuhan Lab would absolutely fall under that category – we should expect standard operating practice is that they would have a close relationship with the Chinese Communist Party and with the PLA," said American University history professor Justin Jacobs, a China scholar.

That WIV could potentially suffer a serious lab accident was not far from the minds of the State Department visitors there who, in 2018, reportedly cabled back to Washington that they had observed WIV personnel practicing lax safety protocols.

Asked about the Z Division report, Rep. Michael McCaul (R-TX), ranking member on the House foreign affairs committee, declined to comment on classified material but emphasized the need for further study. "From what I have seen and read, you absolutely cannot dismiss the notion that the WIV lab is a potential source of the virus," McCaul said in a statement to Sinclair. "And if you listen to the leaders in the previous and current administrations, they have said exactly the same thing."

In its own report on the origin of SARS-CoV-2, issued March 30, the World Health Organization team – which was denied access by the Chinese government to key sites and data and was compelled to seek formal Chinese concurrence in its findings – designated the indirect-zoonotic theory (bat-animal-human) as "very likely," even as the team conceded it could not identify an intermediate host. By contrast, the joint WHO-Chinese report termed the lab-origin theory "extremely unlikely."

The disclosure that top scientists at Lawrence Livermore reached an opposite conclusion in the spring of 2020, by which point some 104,000 Americans had died – about 18 percent of the present total – is fueling calls for a new probe. "This is why it's crucial the WHO conduct an independent investigation – not one that is tainted by the Chinese Communist Party's malign influence," said McCaul.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in March that Washington harbored "real concerns about the methodology and the process that went into the [WHO] report, including the fact that the government in Beijing apparently helped to write it."

The Z Division report received only limited distribution at the time of its issuance, sources said, prompting some senior U.S. officials in the Trump administration to make inquiries into why it had not been brought to their attention last May. Senior officials at the Energy and State Departments were said to have intervened to quash efforts by lower-level U.S. officials who, intrigued by the Z Division report, contacted the Livermore scientists who wrote it to seek additional information. Seaver, the LLNL spokesperson, did not respond to that allegation.

One individual said to have been intimately involved in the preparation of the Z Division report is Dr. David J. Rakestraw, a senior science adviser who formerly ran LLNL's biodefense programs and has been coordinating the lab's technical response to COVID-19.

"We've been putting a large amount of focus for the last six years on using the computational resources at LLNL to try to accelerate the timescales for developing a response to an emerging biological threat," Rakestraw said in a Livermore press release early in the pandemic. "That effort has put us in a position where we have tools now that are applicable to helping with the current response."

In an interview with a fellow scientist uploaded to YouTube in May 2020 – two weeks before the Z Division finalized its report – Rakestraw referred to COVID-19 as "a natural occurrence." However, he obliquely framed the outbreak in the context of Chinese gain-of-function research.

"The thing that I've worked on probably the hardest," Rakestraw told Caleb Cheung, a director at Quest Science Center, an educational institution also located in Livermore, California, is "being able to respond rapidly to biological threats as they appeared. And we were focused on both the potential for natural occurrences, like the most recent COVID-19, but also on the potential for adversaries to use advances in biotechnology to create novel threats that we wouldn't have vaccines for."

Contacted by Sinclair, Rakestraw did not respond to messages left with his wife and on his home voice mail.

The slow distribution of the Z Division report across the senior echelons of the U.S. interagency – the document quietly circulated to the White House National Security Council, the State Department, and other agencies – led a handful of Trump administration officials to seek access to reporting by other intelligence agencies on the subject.

Its existence unknown to most Americans – even to some inside the intelligence community – Z Division was created in 1965 to study Soviet nuclear weapons programs. According to *The U.S. Intelligence Community* (2008 ed.), authored by the late Jeffrey T. Richelson, an intelligence historian and senior fellow at George Washington University's National Security Archive, the division expanded its focus to include biological and chemical weapons programs. A 2006 job ad for the unit sought a biomedical scientist "with a background in virology, microbiology, immunology, epidemiology or other areas of science and medicine relevant to Biological Weapons issues."

Even credentialed scientists who have given credence to the lab-origin theory, however, have found themselves condemned for it. On March 26, 2021, ahead of the release of the joint WHO-China report, Dr. Robert Redfield, the virologist who headed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the outbreak, told CNN he believed "the most likely etiology" for SARS-CoV-2 was that it "escaped" from a lab in Wuhan.

That assessment led some liberal lawmakers to demand Redfield's resignation from an advisory position he took, after leaving CDC, with the office of Governor Larry Hogan (R-MD). State

Senate President Bill Ferguson, a Democrat representing Baltimore City, said Redfield's embrace of the lab-origin scenario would add to the anti-Asian sentiment that has arisen since the outbreak began in late 2019.

"Dr. Redfield's comments were inappropriate, unacceptable and beyond unfortunate," Ferguson said. "A comment like this on national news is just not okay." Hogan's office quickly said it would not ask Redfield to step down.

Asked about Redfield's comments, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said in a March 26 video-briefing with reporters that "most public health individuals go by" the zoonotic-origin theory.

Fauci cited the transmissibility of SARS-CoV-2, how "well adapted to humans" it is, as the central factor that either theory must be able to explain.

But the remarks by the nation's top infectious disease expert left little doubt that he sides with the zoonotic theory.

"Dr. Redfield was mentioning that he was giving an opinion as to a possibility," Fauci added. "But, again, there are other alternatives — others that most people hold by."

Sinclair's Julian Baron contributed research for this report.