



11 January 2023

**To the editors, authors, and contributors to major scientific, medical, and journalistic publications worldwide, especially those named below:**

COVID-19 has resulted in the loss of an estimated 15 million lives worldwide to date. Financial losses are estimated to be in the tens of trillions globally, including at least \$16 trillion for the United States alone. It has resulted in untold human suffering, including marked increases in mental health issues, poverty, hunger, substance abuse, and far-reaching detrimental effects on young people around the world. Understanding the origins of the virus is essential to our pandemic preparedness in the future.

From the beginning of the crisis, when the information environment was undoubtedly contentious, divisive, and confusing, some editors and reporters of news organizations and scientific publications stifled debate on the origins of the virus. Some even leveled [accusations of racism](#) against those who sought in good faith to investigate whether the virus may have originated from a lab leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Leading scientific journals censored dissenting voices; many science writers at major news outlets promoted narratives or asserted conclusions unsubstantiated by evidence; reporters failed to make even cursory attempts at surfacing potential conflicts of interest of their sources. This served to hamper national and international policy discussions about how to mitigate against future pandemics *of any origin*—natural, accidental, or deliberate.

Our security and prosperity depend on rigorous scientific debate, research, and scholarship, as well as an intrepid and independent news media. The responsibility of scientists and journalists alike is to ask hard questions and seek truth. By prematurely dismissing or stigmatizing certain questions—from the very outset of the pandemic—many prominent scientists and journalists failed in their duty.

Over the past two years, investigations into the origins of COVID-19 have established a lab leak as a legitimate possible explanation for the emergence of the pandemic. These inquiries include the [World Health Organization Scientific Advisory Group on the Origin of Novel Pathogens](#), [intelligence reports](#); letters by scientists; [multiple Congressional reports](#) by the minority staffs of the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs and the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions; and inquiries by highly credible scientists and reporters.



Today, the signers of this letter (coordinated by the Vandenberg Coalition—a non-partisan organization committed to advancing U.S. national security and emphasizing policy over politics) call on scientific journals and news-gathering organizations worldwide to investigate these failures, hold responsible parties accountable, and rededicate themselves to the founding ideals of their crafts, which should include impartiality and adherence to evidence-based inquiry. Journalists should always prioritize the interests of their readers above any agendas of their sources.

We also call on major news organizations worldwide to carry out deeper investigations into the pandemic’s origins, particularly by examining all credible origins hypotheses, and call on scientific journals to examine how the debate about pandemic origins can be more open and balanced.

**These are but a few of the notable failures:**

- *The Lancet’s* decision to feature, without any balancing content, an open letter in the earliest days of the pandemic, which asserted without evidence that questioning the supposed natural origin of COVID-19 constituted [“misinformation” and a “conspiracy theory” that threatened the “rapid, open, and transparent sharing of data”](#) about the virus—and would therefore undermine public health efforts.
- The insinuation, in a separate report by *The Lancet*, that anyone who questioned a small group of vocal, self-appointed representatives of the scientific establishment’s position on the origins of COVID-19 [was in some way responsible for the social unrest and political acrimony](#) caused by the pandemic. The premature ruling out of any possibility that a leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology could have played a role in the outbreak of COVID-19, [as was done in an article in \*Nature Medicine\*](#). The article became one of the most-cited academic journal articles in history and effectively stigmatized anyone who questioned whether the outbreak may have originated in a laboratory.
- The prominent news play given to scientists who insisted that COVID-19 could only have had a natural origin, without follow-up news stories when it was later discovered that [some of those same scientists admitted to the tenability of the lab-leak theory of origin in private discussions amongst themselves and in conversation with public health officials](#).
- [Biased coverage by \*The New York Times\*](#) of a [pre-print publication](#) asserting “dispositive” proof that the pandemic originated in a Wuhan wet market, without a careful follow-on story after that specific assertion [failed to survive a peer-review](#)



[process](#) at *Science* magazine, and when other [data](#) called into question the premise of the research.

The dispassionate search for truth is a cornerstone of responsible science and journalism. At a time when social media apps are fueling uncivil, hyper-partisan, and unbalanced public discourse, it is even more critical that reporters and editors strive for balance, assert their independence, and resist partisanship and peer pressure. This standard should apply to media organizations of all backgrounds and persuasions.

Living up to these standards could help prevent similar—or worse—pandemics in the future.

### The Undersigned:

**Chairman Michael McCaul**

U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee

**Matthew Pottinger**

Former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor

**Matt Ridley**

Co-Author of *Viral: The Search for the Origin of Covid-19* and Former Member of the Science and Technology Select Committee of the UK House of Lords

**Jamie Metzl**

Founder and Chair, OneShared.World, Former National Security Council staff, and author of *Hacking Darwin: Genetic Engineering and the Future of Humanity*

**Elliott Abrams**

The Vandenberg Coalition

**John Hillen**

Former Assistant Secretary of State

**Doug Fears**

Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Robert O'Brien**

27<sup>th</sup> U.S. National Security Advisor

**David Stilwell**

Former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian & Pacific Affairs

**David Feith**

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian & Pacific Affairs

**Morgan Ortagus**

POLARIS National Security

**David R. Shedd**

Former Acting Director, Defense Intelligence Agency

**Brian Cavanaugh**

Former Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Resilience Policy, National Security Council

**Allison Hooker**

Former Senior Director for Asian Affairs, National Security Council

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**Christopher Ford**

Former Assistant Secretary of State

**James J. Carafano**

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**Megan Badasch**

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**Steven Quay**

**John Mark Wilson**

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**Matthew Zais**

Atlantic Council and Former Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Energy

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\*All individuals named above have signed in their personal capacities. Affiliations and government titles are listed for identification purposes only.



**Addressed to:**

The editors of *The Lancet* c/o Editor-in-Chief Richard Horton and the signatories of the aforementioned open letters dated February 19, 2020 and July 17, 2021: Charles H. Calisher, Dennis Carroll, Rita Colwell, Ronald B. Corley, Peter Daszak, Christian Drosten, Luis Enjuanes, Jeremy Farrar, Hume Field, Josie Golding, Alexander Gorbalenya, Bart Haagmans, James M. Hughes, William B. Karesh, Gerald T. Keusch, Sai Kit Lam, Juan Lubroth, John S. Mackenzie, Larry Madoff, Jonna Mazet, Peter Palese, Stanley Perlman, Leo Poon, Bernard Roizman, Linda Saif, Kanta Subbarao, and Mike Turner.

The editors of *Nature Medicine* c/o Chief Editor João Monteiro and the authors of the aforementioned article published March 17, 2020: Kristian G. Andersen, Andrew Rambaut, W. Ian Lipkin, Edward C. Holmes, and Robert F. Garry.

The editors of *The New York Times* c/o Executive Editor Joseph Kahn and *New York Times* reporters Carl Zimmer, Benjamin Mueller, and Apoorva Mandavilli.

The editors of *Time Magazine* c/o Editor-in-Chief Edward Felsenthal.