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Why the Chair of the

US Government Is Preventing a Real Investigation Into the Pandemic

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs says he is "pretty convinced [COVID-19] came out of US lab biotechnology" and warns that there is dangerous virus research taking place without public oversight.

Current Affairs

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Prof. Jeffrey Sachs is the Director of the Center for Sustainable Development at Columbia University and the President of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network. He has also served as the chair of the COVID-19 commission for leading medical journal the *Lancet*. Through his investigations as the head of the COVID-19 commission, Prof. Sachs has come to the conclusion that there is extremely dangerous biotechnology research being kept from public view, that the United States was supporting much of this research, and that it is very possible that SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19, originated through dangerous virus research gone awry.

Prof. Sachs recently co-authored a paper in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences calling for an independent inquiry into the virus's origins. He believes that there is clear proof that the National Institutes of Health and many members of the scientific community have been impeding a serious investigation of the origins of COVID-19 and deflecting attention away from the hypothesis that risky U.S.-supported research may have led to millions of deaths. If that hypothesis is true, the implications would be earth-shaking, because it might mean that esteemed members of the scientific community bore responsibility for a

to the conclusion that powerful actors were preventing a real investigation from taking place. He also explains why it is so important to

get to the bottom of the origins of COVID: because, he says, there is extremely dangerous research taking place with little accountability, and the public has a right to know since we are the ones whose lives are being put at risk without our consent.

NATHAN ROBINSON:

I want to quote something that you said recently:

> *"I chaired the commission for the Lancet for two years on COVID. I'm pretty convinced it came out of U.S. lab biotechnology, not out of nature, just to mention. After two years of intensive work on this. So it's a blunder in my view of biotech, not an accident of a natural spillover. We don't know for sure, I should be absolutely clear. But there's enough evidence that it should be looked into. And it's not being investigated, not in the United States, not anywhere. And I think for real reasons that they don't want to look underneath the rug, the statement."*

The statement that you made there is a controversial one. Just to read a couple of quotes from the *New York Times* in the last year:

> "In a review of recent studies and comparisons to other outbreaks, a group of virologists contends that there is more evidence to

> that point to a large food and live animal market in Wuhan,

China, as the origin of the coronavirus pandemic."

So I want to start by asking you just to tell us a little bit about the investigation that you were part of and what led you to think that what I just quoted is a misleading statement of the state of the evidence.

JEFFREY SACHS:

Well, the funny thing is those scientists who are saying that said the same thing on February 4, 2020, before they had done any research at all. And they published the same statement in March 2020, before they had any facts at all. So they're creating a narrative. And they're denying the alternative hypothesis without looking closely at it. That's the basic point.

Now, what is the alternative hypothesis? The alternative hypothesis is quite straightforward. And that is that there was a lot of research underway in the United States and China on taking SARS-like viruses, manipulating them in the laboratory, and creating potentially far more dangerous viruses. And the particular virus that causes COVID-19, called SARS-Cov-2, is notable because it has a piece of its genetic makeup that makes the virus more dangerous. And that piece of the genome is called the "furin cleavage site." Now, what's interesting, and concerning if I may say so, is that the research that was underway very actively and being promoted, was to insert furin cleavage sites into SARS-like viruses to see what would happen. Oops!

Well, that is what *may* have happened. And what has been true from the start is that that very real possibility, which a lot of scientists know, has not been looked at closely, even though it's absolutely clear that it could have happened that way. They're not looking. They just keep telling us, "Look at the market, look at the market, look at the market!" But they don't address this alternative. They don't even look at the data.

could date from the first phone call of the National Institutes of Health

(NIH) with a group of virologists on February 1, 2020, the virologists said "Oh my god, that is strange, that could well be a laboratory creation. What is that furin cleavage site doing in there?" Because scientists knew that was part of an active ongoing research program. And yet, by February 3, the same group is saying "No, no, it's natural, it's natural." By February 4, they start to draft the papers that are telling the public, "Don't worry, it's natural." By March, they write a paper—totally spurious, in my view—called the proximal origins paper that is the most cited bio paper in 2020. It said: it is absolutely natural. [Note: the paper's conclusion is "we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible."] But they didn't have any of the data that you read about in the *New York Times*. They didn't have any of this. They just said the labs weren't working on this alternative. But you know what, they don't know what the labs were working on, because they never asked, and NIH hasn't told us.

ROBINSON:

Let me ask you if we can distinguish between what we know for certain and what is speculative because we just haven't got the data. So we *do* know that there was—correct me if I'm wrong—research proposed that would have dealt with this category of viruses and would have modified them in ways that would have made them potentially more lethal. Do we know whether that kind of research was in fact actually ongoing somewhere?

was, because the scientists that were doing that research loved that

research. And they explained to us publicly why it's so important. And they wrote editorials about why this research must continue. And they made grant proposals saying that it should continue. And for those of us in the business of writing grant proposals, the fact that a particular grant proposal that's deeply troubling was turned down *doesn't* mean that it wasn't carried out afterwards. But where is NIH saying, "Yeah, that's an interesting question. Why don't we get the evidence?" It doesn't even ask that question.

And the scientists like those that talk about the Huanan market, they don't even discuss that research that was underway. That is just misdirection, to my mind. It's like sleight of hand art. Don't look over there. Look over here. But we know that there was a tremendous amount of this research underway. We have interviews by the lead scientists. We have these research proposals. I know the intention of doing this research from discussions. I've read so many studies of the importance of this research claimed by the scientists. And yet I see NIH with its head in the ground. "Oh, no, nothing here to look at." And then I see the scientists. "Oh, nothing here to look at. We know it's the market. Did we find an animal? No. Do we have an explanation of where that furin cleavage site came in? No. We don't have an explanation of the timing, which doesn't quite look right. Oh, but *don't look over there,* because there's nothing there," they keep telling us. Well, that's a little silly.

So my point is, there is a huge amount of reason to believe that that research was underway. Because there are published papers on this. There are interviews on this. There are research proposals. But NIH isn't

program. They discuss complete straw men about the lab, not the actual

kind of research that was underway, which was to stick furin cleavage sites into SARS-like viruses in a way that could have created SARS-Cov-2.

What I'm calling for is not the *conclusion.* I'm calling for the *investigation.* Finally, after two and a half years of this, it's time to fess up that it might have come out of a lab and here's the data that we need to know to find out whether it did.

ROBINSON:

One of the things that struck me that I didn't know when I started writing about this and actually doing some some research is realizing that in the years leading up to the pandemic, there was a huge controversy about whether it was wise to modify viruses in the course of research in ways that could make a virus more infectious or more lethal. And some people were arguing that this kind of research was insane. And some people were warning that in the case of a lab accident—an accident, mind you, not as an intentional "bioweapon"—a simple human error could cause a real catastrophe.

SACHS:

That is exactly right. There were several kinds of experiments of manipulation of the genes of dangerous viruses. And this raised a lot of alarm. And there was actually a moratorium in 2014. But the champions of this kind of research pushed on, they applied for waivers, which they got, and finally the moratorium came off in 2017. And they said how

develop drugs and vaccines against a wide spectrum of them. So we have

to test all these viruses that we can find, to see whether they have high spillover potential." But they weren't actually aiming to just test viruses that they were collecting in nature. They were aiming to *modify* those viruses. Because the scientists knew that a SARS-like virus without a furin cleavage site wouldn't be that dangerous. But they wanted to test their drugs and vaccines and theories against dangerous viruses. Their proposal was to take hundreds, by the way—or least they talked about in one proposal more than 180 previously unreported strains—and test them for their so-called "spillover potential." How effective would they be? And to look: do they have a furin cleavage site, or technically what's called a proteolytic cleavage site? And if not, *put them in*. For heaven's sake. My God! Are you kidding?

Okay, but we didn't even ask the question from the first day: did you guys *do* that? Tell us what you did. Could you give us your lab notebooks? We're kind of curious. Instead, these people who are writing these *New York Times* articles right now and publishing these pieces about the market, from the first day—without asking about the experiments—they said, "Nope, it's natural." That's why I don't trust them. Because they've never looked at the alternative hypothesis. And their hypothesis has so many gaps, so many holes in it. But they don't even try to look at the alternative hypothesis.

ROBINSON:

I think it's very important to make clear that the "alternative hypothesis" is mainly a hypothesis about an accident, and scientific hubris. It's

SACHS:

In fact, it's very interesting. The alternative that is the *right* one to look at is part of a very extensive research program that was underway from 2015 onward, funded by the NIH, by Tony Fauci, in particular NIAID [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases], and it was to examine the spillover potential of SARS-like viruses. The champions of this research explained in detail their proposals. But after the event, we'd never asked them, "So what were you actually doing? What experiments did you do? What do you know?" We somehow never asked. It was better just to sweep it under the rug, which is what Fauci and the NIH have done up until this point. Maybe they could tell us, "Oh, full exoneration," but they haven't told us that at all. They haven't shown us anything.

So there's nothing "kooky" about it, because it's precisely what the scientists were doing. And then you can listen to the scientists on tape describing why they think the research program is so important, because they say these are dangerous viruses, and therefore we have to prepare broad spectrum vaccines and drugs. They explain it's not good enough to test one or two viruses. We have to test all of them. And then they came to realize, as I said earlier, that just having a SARS-like virus, if it doesn't have this piece of the gene, it's almost surely not going to be that effective. So they got around to the idea. "Well, let's put these in," if you can imagine that. To my mind, it's mind-boggling.

But they were proud of this, because it's actually genius at a technological level. Can you imagine: you can take a sequence of letters, which defines the genome, you can recreate the virus just from the letters. You don't even have to have the biological virus in hand, you just need the sequence. Then you can say "I'm going to add these four letters RRAR, the furin cleavage site, or maybe it's eight, RRARSVAS, this is a sequence of eight amino acids—I'm going to stick it in there right at the S1 S2 junction of the spike protein, because I know from my research program that will make it more pathogenic, that is more disease-causing. And then I can see whether my drug candidates like remdesivir, or some other candidate works against it. That is their idea. There's nothing kooky about our claim: Hey, what were you doing? Because *they told us that they wanted to do these projects.* And they told us that they were wanting to do these projects in the months leading up to this outbreak. And then what is absolutely strange is that even though scientists knew right from the start, that is very weird to have that RRAR furin cleavage site in there —never saw that before in a SARS-like virus, and that that could well have come from a lab—hush, hush. Don't talk about it. Don't even discuss it. Just say right from the beginning: *This is natural. Of course, it's natural. Everything else is kooky.*

So you saw a narrative being created. And the scientists are not acting like scientists. Because when you're acting like a scientist, you're

forward is that it came in a city, Wuhan, where an institute was located.

Well, that's a lie. That is not the only coincidence that leads to this theory. What leads to this alternative hypothesis is the *detailed research program the NIH funded* that was underway in the years leading up to the outbreak. So I see the scientists absolutely trying to create a narrative and take our eyes off of another issue.

Now, again, let me emphasize, we don't have definitive evidence of either hypothesis. But what we do have is definitive evidence that officialdom has tried to keep our eyes away from the lab creation hypothesis.

ROBINSON:

You mentioned the lab in Wuhan. It's not just that there was a lab in Wuhan doing research on viruses. But there were ties between the lab and those pursuing this program. What do we know about the research that was actually occurring there?

SACHS:

We know that at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the scientists there had been trained by American scientists to use advanced bioengineering methodologies. And in particular, we have scientists in North Carolina, Texas, and so forth who do this kind of research, believe in it, argue for it, and say that they don't want any regulations on it and so on. And they were in close contact with Wuhan Institute of Virology, and they were part of a joint research group that was stitched together by something called EcoHealth Alliance. And EcoHealth Alliance was the kind of

Tony Fauci's unit, the NIAID. There were years of grants, there were

grant proposals. We don't know exactly what was done. But we have enough reason to know that we should be *asking* exactly what was done. And we know definitively that from the beginning, NIH has been running from telling us what has been done. They're not telling us the truth, that they had reason to fear from the start that this came out of a lab. And that to this day, they have reason to suspect it, but they're not talking.

ROBINSON:

A shocking thing to me was that the head of the EcoHealth Alliance was on the World Health Organization team that actually investigated the origins of COVID and concluded that it wasn't the lab.

SACHS:

Well, more than that: I appointed him—this was Peter Daszak—I appointed him to chair the task force of the pandemic commission that I was running for the *Lancet.* And he headed a task force on the origins. I thought, naively at the beginning, "Well, here's a guy who is so connected, he would know." And then I realized he was not telling me the truth. And it took me some months, but the more I saw it, the more I resented it.

And so I told him, "Look, you have to leave." And then the other scientists in that task force attacked me for being anti-scientific. And I asked them: "What are your connections with all of this?" They didn't tell me. Then when the Freedom of Information Act released some of

they're not talking. And they're trying to keep our eyes on something

else. And away from even asking the questions that we're talking about. We don't have the answers. But we have good reasons to ask. And we have good reasons to know that NIH is not doing its job properly right now.

ROBINSON:

So you're saying that Daszak and others did not disclose to you pretty serious conflicts of interest? Since, on the hypothesis that it had something to do with this kind of research, that would have implicated Daszak himself in the origins of the crisis?

SACHS:

Well, he could have explained to me right from the beginning that there was a big research program and that they were manipulating the viruses, and here's how. He could have given me the research proposals. And when I asked him for one of the research proposals, he said, "No, my lawyer says I can't give it to you." I said, "What? You're heading a commission. We're a transparent commission. You're telling me your *lawyer* says you can't give me your project proposal." I said, "Well, then you can't be on this commission. This is not even a close call."

But there were so many other things. He was just filled with misdirection. I don't know whether he understands or not, maybe he doesn't understand. But the things he said just were absolutely not right.

ROBINSON:

Why would people not be interested in getting to the truth? But the alternate hypothesis from the natural spillover that you're talking about

could have serious repercussions. It would implicate a lot of people in potentially millions of deaths. So there's a lot at stake here for the scientific community. Which explains why there would be an interest in directing people away from this possibility.

SACHS:

There are at least two reasons why they might be doing what they're doing. One is, as you say, the implications are huge. Imagine if this came out of a lab. And we have, by some estimates, about 18 million dead worldwide from this. That's not the official count. But that's the estimated excess mortality from COVID. Well, the implications of that —the ethical, the moral, the geopolitical—everything is enormous.

But there's a second matter that is really important, too. One thing that is rather clear to me is that there is so much dangerous research underway right now under the umbrella of biodefense or other things that we don't know about, that is not being properly controlled. This is for sure. And that's happening around the world. And governments say "don't poke your nose into that." That's our business, not your business. But it's actually our business. It's our business to understand what is going on with this. This is not to be kept secret. We don't trust you.

Let me put it this way: I don't trust them right now. I want to know. Because even what we know of the dangerous research is enough to raise a lot of questions of responsibility for the future. And to pose the question: "Hey, what other viruses are you guys working on? What should we know?" Because no matter what the truth is on SARS-Cov-2,

like that feeling at all. I don't recommend it for us and for the world.

ROBINSON:

Well, you've rather answered the question of why it's important to get to the bottom of this. Because one of the excuses you hear is, "Well, who really cares? Does it matter? It was an animal, it was a lab, whatever it is, it's here." But what you're saying is, "No, we actually need to know where this started." Because this isn't going to be the only one, whatever the origins are. And we don't want people to die from future viruses. This is critically important. If we're going to save millions of lives, we have to find out the answer.

SACHS:

I can tell you one thing that I've learned from talking to a lot of scientists in the last couple of years: the technological capacity to do dangerous things using this biotechnology is extraordinary right now. So I want to know what's being done. I want to know what other governments are doing, too, not just ours. I want some global control over this stuff.

We've kind of understood the nuclear risk—even that, of course, is in a lot of ways hidden from view. But this is a clear and present risk. And there's reason to believe we're actually in the midst of it, not just hypothetically. So come on: it's time to open the books everywhere. It's time to find out. Maybe it was the marketplace. Maybe it wasn't a lab. But we need to get real answers, now. Not the kind of misdirection that's been going in since February 2020. Enough nonsense! Enough *New York Times* stories saying, "Oh, it's this, it's that," without looking closely at the very plausible laboratory hypothesis.

COVID-19 commission, you didn't feel you were able to get satisfactory

answers or see the data you wanted. What kind of investigation do we need and who ought to do it?

SACHS:

The most interesting things that I got as chair of the *Lancet* commission came from Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuits and whistleblower leaks from inside the U.S. government. Isn't that terrible? NIH was actually asked at one point: give us your research program on SARS-like viruses. And you know what they did? They released the cover page and redacted 290 pages. They gave us a cover page and 290 blank pages! That's NIH, for heaven's sake. That's not some corporation. That is the U.S. government charged with keeping us healthy.

What I found is that we have a lot of data which we're not finding right now. And I don't want to have to rely on FOIA and leaks, though those can be incredibly informative. I want clear, independent scientific investigation and transparency. One way to do this would be a bipartisan congressional oversight investigation that had subpoena power. Give us your lab records, your notebooks, your data files of virus strains, and so forth. There are many questions that we need independent scientists to define, to tell us exactly the kinds of information. But we know right now we're operating in an environment in which the government is working to hide the data that we need to make a real assessment.