Before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, nuance and candor from governments were in short supply. Now they are almost nonexistent. Protecting the world from severe acute respiratory syndrome–coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) can’t happen without international scientific collaboration. Progress on vaccines in China and the United States should make us optimistic that science will solve this problem, but the actions of the governments involved are not equally inspiring.

The saber rattling by China and the United States is unnecessary, as the broad impacts of the pandemic in both countries are shared. Isn’t that worth curbing nationalistic tendencies? Apparently not to China, which has rebuffed efforts to understand the origin of SARS-CoV-2. And not to the Trump administration either, which can’t grasp that it’s possible to question the actions of the Chinese government about the early days of the pandemic while embracing collaboration with Chinese science. In a worldwide pandemic, isn’t it best for everyone to cooperate and try to save all of humanity together?

We need a both/and approach, but we are living in an either/or world.

The latest setback is the decision by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) to terminate the grant “Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence” to Peter Daszak of the nonprofit EcoHealth Alliance, who, with NIH approval, shared one in five grant dollars with Shi Zhengli, a top coronavirologist at China’s Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). We are asked to believe that the highly ranked project was killed because even though it sought to prevent the next bat-originating human pandemic, it did not “align” with the NIH’s goals and priorities. This comes while the administration is popping up and circulating the unproven theory that the virus escaped from the Shi lab at the WIV, when the science is clearly in favor of zoonotic transfer in nature.

The genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2 rules out a lab-engineered virus. And although escape from a lab of a naturally occurring virus that was isolated from bat specimens collected by scientists cannot be completely eliminated as the origin, the closest laboratory version of the virus (published by Shi and collaborators) is separated from SARS-CoV-2 by at least 20 years of evolutionary time. SARS-CoV-2 would have had to have escaped from the lab decades ago—or, another virus that was brought into the lab and not documented somehow escaped. Either way, only a chain of unlikely events could explain laboratory involvement.

The U.S. administration instructed its intelligence community to investigate this matter. Last week, these intelligence agencies ruled out that the virus was lab-engineered. They have not reached any conclusions about whether a virus might have escaped from the lab. But in the absence of evidence, the administration will likely turn uncertainty into “truth”—a lab escape—that serves its narrative.

Even in the face of the intelligence report to the contrary, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo initially said that “the best experts so far seem to think it was man-made.” Apparently, the best experts are neither scientists nor intelligence experts. Pompeo claims to have additional evidence that we are unlikely to see, if it even exists.

What would we have learned from the research that got squashed? Daszak and his colleagues were working to pinpoint hotspots in southern China with a high risk of bat-to-human transfer (most likely with an intermediary species involved) of coronaviruses. It might be good to find those hotspots if we don’t want to go through all of this again. And as important, the bat coronavirus sequences identified at the WIV were used in lab tests of the drug remdesivir, currently the only scientifically supported treatment for COVID-19. Vanderbilt University’s Mark Denison, who helped advance the drug, said of the Alliance’s research, “Our work on remdesivir absolutely would not have moved forward” without it.

I feel for, and admire, our scientific colleagues in the U.S. federal government. They are giving all they’ve got to protect the American public and others under impossible circumstances. Before the pandemic, the NIH went overboard to deal with foreign influence in U.S. research because of the nationalistic pressure it was under. Now, the agency is trying to dodge political lunges from an administration that puts political success above human life.

The tyranny of either/or is that we only survive on our own. The promise of both/and is that the world is imperfect but we’re all in this together.

—H. Holden Thorp
Both/and problem in an either/or world
H. Holden Thorp

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