Opinion
NCR Voices



Dr. Robert Redfield, former director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, arrives for the start of a hearing by the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, at the Capitol March 8 in Washington. (AP photo/J. Scott Applewhite)



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The late, great U.S. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts." Alas, the power of the gavel has convinced House Republicans that they are entitled to their own facts.

At a hearing March 8 of the House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic, the first group of witnesses all testified that they believe the coronavirus that caused a worldwide pandemic originated in a laboratory leak in Wuhan, China.

"There is no smoking gun proving a laboratory origin hypothesis, but the growing body of circumstantial evidence suggests a gun that is at very least warm to the touch," said Jamie Metzl, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a former State Department official.

"Based on my initial analysis of the data, I came to believe and I still believe today that it indicates that Covid-19 more likely was a result of an accidental lab leak than the result of a natural spillover event," concurred former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield. "This conclusion is based primarily on the biology of the virus itself."

I do not know the first thing about medical science. But I know enough about politics and about journalism to suspect that this issue of the virus's origins is not going to be faced squarely on the merits, but will become one more grenade in the culture wars, thrown about with an equal measure of actual doubt and pretended certainty, targeting political opponents first and foremost.

That said, the subcommittee chairman actually voiced an appropriate modesty about the state of the investigation. "I've been gathering a lot of this evidence over the last few years that does have the breadcrumbs leading towards the lab," said

Rep. Brad Wenstrup. "That's my opinion at this time. But we want to be able to get to the facts and prove this not only for the American people, but for the world, so that in the future we can predict a pandemic, prepare for a pandemic, protect ourselves from it."

Alas, such judicious qualifiers as "at this time" get lost in the Twitter-verse and on cable news where it is important to choose sides and then align the facts to support your side.

Fox News coverage, for example here and here, highlighted a recent comment by FBI director Christopher Wray that the virus "most likely" originated in a lab but failed to note that other intelligence agencies had not reached that conclusion.

You had to turn to The New York Times to find out that other parts of the government have not reached that conclusion. Their article previewing the hearing stated:

> The F.B.I. also believes that the cause of the pandemic was "most likely a potential lab incident," the bureau's director, Christopher A. Wray, confirmed last week. But four other intelligence agencies, as well as the National Intelligence Council, have concluded, also with low confidence, that the virus most likely originated in animals and then spread naturally to humans. The C.I.A. has not taken a position.

Fair and balanced, you might say.

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Some liberal outlets and spokespersons set themselves up for a backlash, should evidence be found that the virus originated in a lab, by invoking science in ways that are, well, unscientific. How many times have we heard the phrase "the science is

settled" over the years, a phrase that is, at best, ambiguous and easily open to misuse. Science is always changing, but we know the sun will rise in the East not the West. The science about the origin of a virus is murkier than the sun rising, and when investigators trace the virus to a totalitarian society, good luck getting to the bottom of it.

You do not need to be a scientist to recognize that the Republican Party's fixation on the lab-leak theory has something to do with their idea that President Joe Biden is weak on China, and that his supposed weakness is linked to his son Hunter's business dealings. The party that is still led by the greatest grifters of all time, the Trump family, do not see the irony in their going after Biden and his son.

A deeper concern about the use and abuse of science is that it can not only be instrumentalized to attack a political opponent, but that some are willing to undercut the value of science per se. There is something especially unhealthy and sinful in the MAGA-Republican tendency to blow things up and ask questions later. The populism of the right in America today is nihilist, destructive and dystopian. I worry for those who have fallen under the spell of Trump, especially those who are Christians. How do they not see that nihilism is the opposite of what we are taught in Genesis? What, pray tell, is conservative about destruction?

Science is a good thing, a great thing even. Think of the progress made in our lifetime in everything from heart surgery to space exploration to predicting dangerous weather patterns. There is, however, a tendency found especially on the left — Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker comes to mind — to invest science with more epistemological power than it possesses, a tendency that goes back to Voltaire and the Encyclopedists. Science can never dispense with philosophy or the humanities, and when it does, it becomes scientism. Recognizing the limits of science does not make one a troglodyte. In fact, recognizing its limits helps one defend science from those who wish to abuse it.

If the choice is Tucker Carlson or Tony Fauci, it is not a tough choice. But let's all encourage the defenders of science to be a little bit more cautionary and modest about its claims. Otherwise, if there is ever proof that the virus did originate in a Wuhan lab, other scientific ideas with more demonstrable certainty will be questioned. A culture that is no longer able to come to agreement on even the most

basic facts, is a culture in serious danger. And where is Pat Moynihan when we need him?