

## A Question Best Left

February 13, 2023

“One of the world’s most sensitive and consequential scientific questions will soon be grist for discussion among the members of a [congressional subcommittee](#),” bemoaned David Quammen last month in *The Washington Post*.

“The question is this: Where did the virus that causes covid-19 come from?”

Inquiring minds want to know.

Science writer Quammen admits “the origin question is a seductive one,” but argues it is a “mystery” these congresspeople “will be least likely and least qualified to solve — and they should focus their mission elsewhere.”

While our career congresspeople do not, on the whole, sport the credentials best suited to the investigation, I’m sure they’ll

***The “science journalist” says it’s “a scientific question best left to scientists.”***

invite some real-life scientists to testify. Moreover, the idea of telling folks — even politicians — not to worry their pretty little heads about an issue causing them concern . . . well, that might understandably rub you the wrong way.

The “science journalist” says it’s “a scientific question best left to scientists.”

Though also not a scientist, Quammen seems somehow to have settled upon the answer to the question . . . that he doesn’t want



Congress asking.

He calls the origin of COVID-19 a “not-quite-solved mystery” since most “experts say they believe this virus almost certainly reached humans by natural spillover — that is, from a nonhuman animal host.”

Not via a lab-leak, mind you.

Yet, “almost certainly” doesn’t sound scientifically very certain at all. It does, however, fit well with Quammen’s 2012 [book](#), *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*.

You decide whether Quammen’s prose is inspired by science or politics:

*Consider one implication you might draw from a lab leak: We need less science, especially of the sort that fiddles with dangerous viruses. And from a natural spillover: We need more science, especially of the sort that studies dangerous viruses lurking in wild animals. From a lab leak: It was those foolish scientists in a Chinese lab who unleashed this terrible virus upon us. Suspicion, accusation, presumption of guilt and even a tincture of racism may therefore inform our relations with China, not an effort to encourage transparency and scientific exchange.*

Catch that? It’s important that COVID’s origin be as Big Science says . . . or the racists win.

This is Common Sense. I’m Paul Jacob.