Common Sense

Paul Jacob

A Question Best Left

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"One of the world's most sensitive and consequential scientific questions will soon be grist for discussion among the members of a <u>congressional</u> <u>subcommittee</u>," <u>bemoaned</u> David Quammen last month in *The Washington Post.* "The question is this: Where did the virus that causes covid-19

Inquiring minds want to know.

come from?"

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."

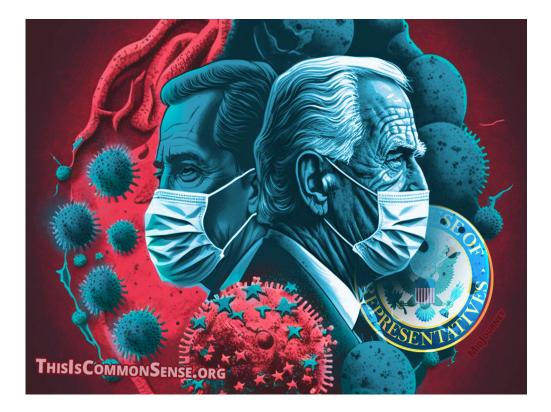
While our career congresspeople do not, on the whole, sport the credentials best suited to the investigation, I'm sure they'll

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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.

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Though also not a scientist, Quammen seems somehow to have settled upon the answer to the question \ldots 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 <u>book</u>, *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 \ldots or the racists win.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.