

NBC's *Today*

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7:00:49 a.m. [TEASE]

27 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: COVID Cover Up?]

CRAIG MELVIN: COVID cover up? The head of the FBI saying his agency now believes the virus did leak from a Wuhan lab while China tried to hide the evidence.

FBI DIRECTOR CHRIS WRAY [on FNC's *Special Report*, 02/28/23]: The Chinese government seems, to me, has been doing its best to try to thwart and obfuscate the work here.

MELVIN: We're live on Capitol Hill amid escalating tensions between Washington and Beijing.

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7:05:10 a.m.

6 minutes and 6 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: FBI Chief Says China Lab Leak "Likely"]

SHEINEILLE JONES: Another major story this morning. New comments from the head of the FBI adding to debate over COVID-19's origin and whether the Chinese government tried to cover it up. It comes as a bipartisan congressional committee sets its sights on what they call China's threat to U.S. national security. We have complete coverage, starting with NBC's senior Capitol Hill correspondent Garrett Haake. Garrett, good morning.

GARRETT HAAKE: Hey, Sheinelle, good morning. Those comments in a rare interview by Director Chris Wray are only adding fuel to this growing debate over where the COVID-19 virus, which has killed more than 1.1 million Americans and counting, actually originated, and now Congress is demanding answers. A blunt new assessment from the head of the FBI about the origins of COVID-19, deepening the debate this morning over what triggered the global pandemic.

WRAY [on FNC's *Special Report*, 02/28/23]: The Chinese government seems, to me, has been doing its best to try to thwart and obfuscate the work here. The FBI has, for quite some time now assessed that the origins of the pandemic are most likely a potential lab incident.

HAAKE: The FBI's agents, analysts, and bio-threat experts assessing that a lab in Wuhan China was the virus's likely source. The Chinese government denies that, but FBI Director Chris Wray says they tried to hide evidence from the world.

WRAY [on FNC's *Special Report*, 02/28/23]: The Chinese government seems, to me, has been doing its best to try to thwart and obfuscate the work here, the work that we're doing.

HAAKE: Wray's comments coming days after news broke that the U.S. Department of Energy also concluded with low confidence that the virus, which has killed more than 1.1 million Americans, had likely originated from a laboratory leak and described it as an accident. Other U.S. agencies believe it occurred naturally, a view which had been the mainstream scientific consensus for much of the pandemic.

DR. TONY FAUCI [on NBC's *Meet the Press*, 11/27/22]: The evidence strongly points to this being a natural occurrence of the jumping of a virus from a bat to an animal species to humans.

HAAKE: The renewed debate over the pandemic's origins among the topics explored in the first primetime hearing of a new bipartisan select committee in Congress focusing on competition between China and the United States.

CONGRESSMAN JIM BANKS (R-IN) [TO POTTINGER]: And do you believe that China has taken appropriate steps to make a future lab leak less likely?

MATTHEW POTTINGER: I think that the system that's in place in China does not permit for or prize serious safety.

HAAKE: The committee's Republican chairman telling NBC News he hopes its work serves as a national wake-up call.

CONGRESSMAN MIKE GALLAGHER (R-WI): I hope people understand why they should care about the threat posed by the Chinese communist party. Why this is not just a distant, over there problem, but increasingly a problem that affects all Americans right here at home.

HAAKE: Now, the Chinese foreign ministry responded to Director Wray's comments overnight, pushing back against the lab leak theory and accusing the U.S. of politicizing the pandemic. Craig?

MELVIN: Our senior Capitol Hill correspondent Garrett Haake for us. Garrett, thank you. Let's bring in NBC News analyst John Brennan, who served as CIA Director under President Obama. Director Brennan, good morning to you, sir. Let's start with the FBI director's comments there that he — has believed since 2021 with a medium level of confidence that the virus did, in fact, start in that Wuhan lab, coming on the heels of the Department of Energy report that said pretty much the same thing but with a low level of confidence. Director, based on what you read, what you heard from the intelligence community, where do you think this virus started?

JOHN BRENNAN: Well, Craig, I think what we have in the intelligence community is a hung jury where the members of the jury have received this intelligence and they have different perspectives, expertise about what the origins of it were. And I think it's important for us to understand as much as possible about how this pandemic originated, but I think the most important point is to strengthen the safety and security procedures at these biolabs labs, whether they be in China or around the world. Because there's a very plausible explanation, as the Department of Energy and FBI believes, that it did originate from a leak from the Wuhan lab.

MELVIN: Do — do you think — again, to — to Garrett's point in his story there, there are still a number of folks who believe that it occurred naturally, perhaps started in a bat and then somehow transferred to a human. Now you've got these conflicting reports from various government agencies. Do you think we'll ever know for certain how the virus started?

BRENNAN: Well, I think the Chinese are making it very difficult for us to know with any type of certainty how the virus started. But it's my impression there's a lot of circumstantial evidence that all the different agencies are trying to understand and analyze, and that's why they come out with the different bottom lines. But, again, I think almost irrespective of if we can be certain about it, we need to take the appropriate measures and encourage the Chinese and others to take these measures and prevent any future leak of these viruses from these research laboratories. That, I think, is the most important aspect of this.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Rising U.S.-China Tensions]

MELVIN: On a macro-level here, director, the origins of the virus, China's attempts to — to cover it up, the spy balloon incident, reports that China wants to perhaps help the Russians in Ukraine. Now you have the primetime hearings supported by Republicans and Democrats en masse there in Washington regarding the threat that China poses to the United States. As we sit here right now this morning, how would you characterize the threat that China poses to the U.S.?

BRENNAN: Oh, I — so, it's multidimensional. You didn't mention TikTok. There have been developments in China — particularly on the technology front — that I think pose a serious security threat and risk to the United States as well as the rest of the world. It's clear that China is not in the mood to cooperate on a number of issues and is being rather provocative, in terms of — whether it be intelligence collection activities or — as well as refusing to cooperate on things as important as the pandemic. So, I do think the world is quite fraught. I'm glad that there's a bipartisan effort to try to look at what we can do to mitigate the threats. But I think the challenge is going to be a long term one with China.

MELVIN: Former CIA Director John Brennan. Director, thank you.

BRENNAN: Thanks, Craig.