

CBS Mornings

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[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Dr. Fauci to Testify on COVID Origins]

NATALIE MORALES: Now to Capitol Hill where we could see an explosive hearing today when Dr. Anthony Fauci appears in front of a Senate committee. He will face questions about the origin and handling of the COVID pandemic. Senator Rand Paul released more than a thousand pages of revealing journal entries from Fauci. They detail Fauci's relationship with President Trump and how he apparently reveled in his own fame. Caitlin Huey-Burns is in the committee room. Caitlin, good morning.

CAITLIN HUEY-BURNS: Good morning, Natalie. Chairman Rand Paul is the chairman of this committee. He has long been a Fauci critic, and today's hearing is likely going to focus on the origins of the COVID outbreak and what Dr. Fauci knew and when.

SENATOR RAND PAUL (R-KY): It's about accountability, but it's about also winning the ultimate debate so we won't do this again.

HUEY-BURNS: Six years after the COVID-19 pandemic started, questions still swirl over where the virus actually came from. In the thousands of diary entries from his time leading the government's response, Dr. Anthony Fauci recounted the debate over how it all started. In an entry in late January of 2020, Fauci referred to a wet market in Wuhan, China, writing, "now we know the market was not the source, it was the amplifier. Having said that, somewhere the virus jumped from animals to humans." In May of 2021, Fauci addressed questions about the theory the virus leaked from a lab, writing, "the very highly likelihood is that the virus originated naturally, but adding, no one is 100% certain of the origin, including me, so I am calling for a thorough investigation." Something Fauci echoed that same month publicly.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI [on 05/25/21]: Many of us feel that it is more likely that this is a natural occurrence, as has happened with SARS-CoV-1, where it goes from an animal reservoir to a human, but we don't know 100 percent the answer to that.

HUEY-BURNS: Republican Senator Rand Paul says Fauci suppressed the lab-leak theory and alleges that money from the National Institutes of Health grant funded research to make viruses more transmissible at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the same lab where he claims COVID-19 originated.

PAUL: Why do you say wet market? Because that's an argument for being of natural origin, not the lab. Why doesn't he want it to be from the lab? Because he funded the lab.

HUEY-BURNS: Paul and Fauci have a history of contentious debate on this topic.

PAUL [on 07/20/21]: [T]hey're animal viruses that became more transmissible in human and you funded it, and you won't admit the truth.

[CUT]

FAUCI [on 07/20/21]: [I]f anyone is lying here, senator, it is you.

HUEY-BURNS: Now, as the pandemic went on, Fauci was vilified by many, including President Trump, who argued that his COVID policies were too strict, especially when it came to masking and school closures. Now, President Biden had issued a preemptive blanket pardon for Fauci out of concern that he would be prosecuted by the Trump administration, Vlad.

VLADIMIR DUTHIERS: Alright, Caitlin, thank you very much. Joining us now is Dr. Celine Gounder, a CBS News medical correspondent and editor-at-large for public health at KFF Health News. She was also a member of the Biden-Harris transition COVID Advisory Board. Dr. Gounder, good morning.

DR. CELINE GOUNDER: Good morning.

DUTHIERS: So, Senator Rand has long accused Dr. Fauci of covering up the origins of OVID-19. The senator has claimed on national television that the National Institute of Health funded a lab in China where they were conducting what is called gain-of-function research. What is that exactly?

GOUNDER: So, gain-of-function research, we can use COVID, as an example here. When we have new vaccines every year, we're trying to figure out: Is COVID itself becoming more infectious, more virulent, and how do you have a vaccine that addresses that? And so, gain-of-function research is you're trying to anticipate what's going to happen naturally — you're anticipating in the lab — and you are developing vaccines, and anti-virals, and other countermeasures for what we anticipate may happen. So this is a very important tool in terms of keeping ahead of things.

MORALES: And what do you make of the senator's claim that the doctor was behind the funding of the NIH funding, and then covered it up?

GOUNDER: Well, Dr. Fauci was the head of the National Institutes for Allergies and Infectious Diseases for about 40 years. Over that time, funded many, many different grants. We're talking about \$600,000 between 2014 and 2019, so about \$100,000 a year we are talking about here. That's — what? — a couple people you might have been able to fund with that. Does the CEO of this company know about three people paid \$50,000 a year? [THROWS HANDS Up]

MORALES: Right.

NATE BURLESON: Now, Fauci faced a lot of criticism when it came to his guidance for shutting down schools. Remind us what his role was when it came to those decisions, and then

what are we learning from his diary entries?

GOUNDER: Yeah, so in terms of shutting down the schools, look, Fauci was the most recognizable face of the COVID pandemic in terms of expertise and providing guidance, and he was turned to by a lot of public officials, Governor Cuomo, for example, Mayor de Blasio here in New York City. In his diaries, he documents those conversations and them asking him should we close the schools? He said yes. He had no legal authority, to be clear. Those decisions were made by governors. And where does the authority to close a school sit? It's actually at the state and local levels. That was school boards, governors, teachers unions, where they had strong teachers unions, they were the ones making the decisions.

DUTHIERS: So, in Natalie's introduction, she mentioned that the diary entries sometimes indicate that Dr. Fauci is reveling in his name. There is an awareness in reading the public diaries that he is very aware of his own public profile. So one of the risks, as you know, of celebrity in politics is people start making decisions with an eye towards the camera. Does that happen in medicine when a public health leader is being lauded on camera? Does that influence the way they make decisions or recommendations?

GOUNDER: So, I wanna say I have actually read all of the pages of the diary.

BURLESON: Okay.

MORALES: Okay.

GOUNDER: So, there are two releases, 1,100 and almost 500.

MORALES: Right.

GOUNDER: Most of his comments are actually about the pressure it was creating and the harassment, and death threats, and what that led to in terms of security. So, that's actually most of his comments about the fame.

MORALES: Right.

GOUNDER: Who here has not taken a selfie with a celebrity who has been here in the studio?

MORALES: Right.

GOUNDER: I'm going to say it's basically everybody.

MORALES: Everybody, right. Yes, right.

BURLESON: It's human nature to lean into the limelight, and he had it.

GOUNDER: He had it. But if you look at the preponderance of his comments, most of them are

actually concerns about this is making me really uncomfortable —

MORALES: Aww.

GOUNDER: — I'm really uneasy, this is leading to security issues. It's — you know, the occasional comment about Barbra Streisand is not the headline here.

BURLESON: Yeah.

MORALES: It's just — real quick, Dr. Gounder, I mean, we've seen in debate rage on for six years now. I mean, it's become somewhat political theater here.

GOUNDER: Yeah.

MORALES: What is the impact that this has on our public health system?

GOUNDER: Oh, public health is devastated, and the massive budget cuts — we have multiple outbreaks right now, cyclospora, et cetera, this is very much a reflection, and it's just the beginning.

BURLESON: The hearings have been explosive, and this one will not be different. Dr. Gounder, thank you.