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SCIENCE &amp; TECH

# The NIH Gain-of-Function Research Decision Wasn't Partisan

By JIM GERAGHTY | May 6, 2020 10:29 AM



Microbiologist Milagros Sola processes coronavirus tests in a lab at Madigan Army Medical Center at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., April 14, 2020. (David Ryder/Reuters)

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Over at *Vox*, Kelsey Piper concludes that **gain-of-function research in contagious viruses is probably too dangerous to continue:**

a handful of others is vastly different from the cost-benefit analysis for pathogens that could cause a pandemic — but our current procedures don't really account for that. As a result, allowing gain-of-function research means running unacceptable risks with millions of lives. It's high time to rethink that.



Gain-of-function research is when researchers take an existing virus or pathogen and make it more potentially dangerous — either more contagious, more likely to kill a human host, or both.

No doubt some *Vox* readers will interpret the story as a simple **Goofus-and-Gallant** lesson in gain-of-function research; the Obama administration put a hold on it, and the Trump administration allowed it to continue.

The increased attention to gain-of-function research is a good thing. This kind of highly controversial research — banned under the Obama administration after safety incidents demonstrated that lab containment is rarely airtight — **began again under the Trump administration**, and many scientists and public health researchers think it's a really bad idea. Our

warnings those experts have been sounding for years.

Never mind that the head of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, Frances Collins, signed off on both decisions. NIH had the same bright minds, looking at the same criteria of benefits and potential risks, during both administrations; after three years of determining the best practices, NIH announced the new required safety protocols. There's no indication that this ever even crossed President Trump's desk.

Scientists a lot smarter than me come down on both sides about whether the potential risks of gain-of-function research outweigh the potential benefits. But it seems logical that if we want scientists to learn the best way to fight contagious and deadly pathogens, they have to study samples of contagious and deadly pathogens. Studying not-so-contagious and not-so-deadly ones, and hoping the lessons learned apply universally, probably isn't going to be quite as useful.

Besides that fact, whatever the United States decides, other countries will pursue research under their own rules — and their own safety standards.

I can imagine some people wondering why anyone would want to be doing this sort of research at all — heading into caves, capturing wild bats and collecting “anal swabs” of bat guano, then studying the viruses within those samples and within the bats in controlled environments. While these actions by scientists might increase the risk of exposure to a new virus, human beings are encountering animals and other potential vectors of infection all around the world, every day.

The world has just been hit by a devastating pandemic. Even if laboratory research is how we got into this mess, laboratory research is the only way we get out of this mess. Sooner or later — hopefully later — someone on this planet is

next century; because viruses are always mutating and evolving, there will never be a lack of viruses to study.

However, it is refreshing to see a *Vox* article quoting Thomas Inglesby, director of the Center for Health Security at Johns Hopkins, declaring that “laboratory systems are not infallible, and even in the greatest laboratories of the world, there are mistakes.” Indeed. I hope everyone who argues that a lab accident in Wuhan is impossible — not merely unlikely, but not within the realm of possibility based upon what we know now — hears him clearly.



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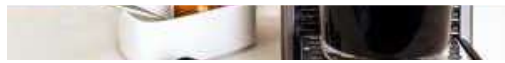
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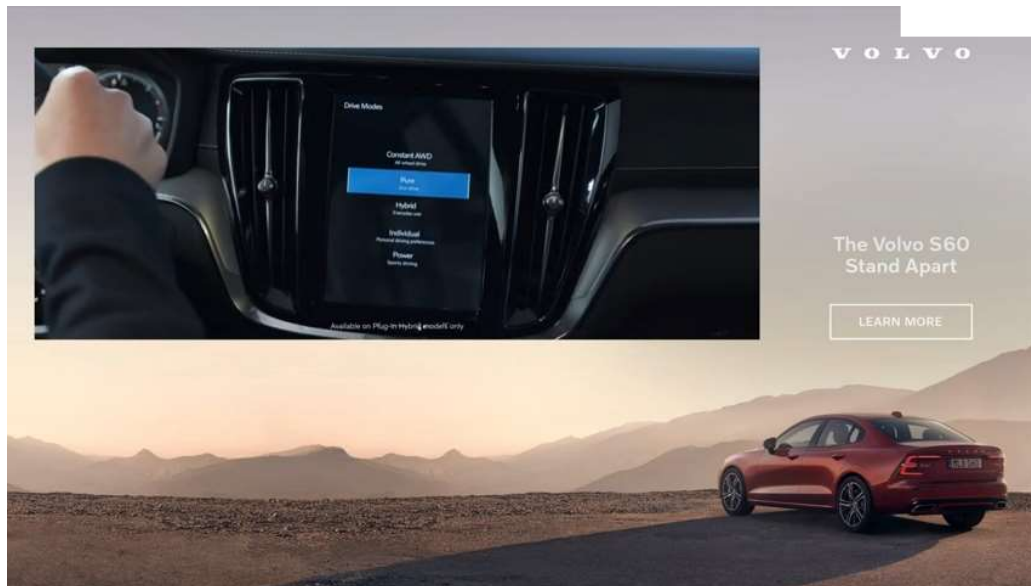
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