



Opinion

Josh Rogin

Congress is investigating whether the 2019 World Games in Wuhan was a covid-19 superspreader event

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Security personnel outside offices of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Wuhan, China, in February. (Hector Retamal/AFP via Getty Images)

In October 2019, more than 9,000 international athletes from more than 100 countries traveled to Wuhan, China — and many of them later got sick with covid-19-like symptoms. But there has never been a real investigation into whether the virus that causes covid-19 was already spreading at the Wuhan Military World

Games. Now, multiple U.S. lawmakers are demanding the U.S. government begin one.

The Military World Games, which are held every four years, are like the Olympics for military athletes. The games in Wuhan were the largest in the event's history, and the Chinese government went all out. The U.S. delegation came with 280 athletes and staff representing 17 sports, ranging from wrestling to golf. (Team USA brought home the bronze in the latter competition.) During the two-week event, however, many of the international athletes noticed that something was amiss in the city of Wuhan. Some later described it as a "ghost town."

As the covid-19 pandemic took hold worldwide in early 2020, athletes from several countries — including France, Germany, Italy and Luxembourg — claimed publicly they had contracted what they believed to be covid-19 at the games in Wuhan, based on their symptoms and how their illnesses spread to their loved ones. In Washington, military leaders either dismissed the idea out of hand or weren't aware of it. Meanwhile, no one performed any antibody testing or disease tracing on these thousands of athletes. No one even attempted to find out whether the games in Wuhan was, in fact, the first international pandemic superspreader event.

If more evidence were discovered, it would add to the growing body of evidence that the virus was circulating in Wuhan as early as October 2019, months before the Chinese government acknowledged it to the rest of the world. U.S. intelligence reports have said that researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology were hospitalized with covid-like symptoms in

November 2019. But U.S. officials have said they have other information suggesting that the outbreak began even earlier.



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Nailing down the timeline of the pandemic's origin is a crucial task. The United States needs to do its best to figure it out, lawmakers are now saying, regardless of where the data leads.

“Given unanswered questions surrounding the origins of the pandemic, information involving the health of service members who participated in the 2019 games could provide key evidence in understanding when COVID-19 first emerged,” Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.) wrote in a letter Monday to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “While anecdotal, these reports raise important questions about the timeline of the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan.”

Has the Pentagon tested the 280 members of the U.S. delegation for antibodies? Were any attempts made to trace outbreaks at the bases they returned to? Has the U.S. military ever communicated with other militaries who participated in the games to share information or data? Is any investigation currently underway?

These are some of the questions Gallagher is putting to the Pentagon. He noted that Robert Redfield, the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has said he believes that the virus began spreading in Wuhan during September or October of 2019 and that more evidence has

emerged that the virus was already present inside the United States by December 2019.

Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.) wrote a separate letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra on this issue Tuesday, asking whether his department was aware of any U.S. athletes who fell ill after returning from Wuhan. He also wanted to know whether HHS was either looking into the issue or discussing it with the Defense Department.

“The World Military Games’ proximity to the [Wuhan Institute of Virology] and the new details of the athletes potentially being exposed to COVID-19 while participating in the event present an alarming coincidence our government must investigate to establish an accurate timeline of the outbreak,” Marshall wrote. “If these individuals were exposed in October, this evidence will further help us understand the origin of COVID-19 and prepare for future outbreaks.”

HHS did not respond to a request for comment. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told me that the Defense Department has no knowledge of covid-19 infections among U.S. troops participating in the 2019 World Military Games. He said that there’s no evidence U.S. military personnel were infected before travel restrictions the U.S. government implemented in early 2020.

“We fully support ongoing investigative efforts into the origins of COVID-19 — efforts that would, of course, benefit from full transparency by Chinese authorities,” he said.

Of course, there's no way the U.S. government could have such evidence if they never tested the athletes in the first place. Five senior national security officials from the Trump administration told me that no one even thought to test the U.S. military athletes who returned from Wuhan. At that time, they noted, the conventional wisdom was that covid-19 had broken out in December 2019, not two months earlier.

The State Department's only consideration of the Wuhan Military World Games came when the Chinese foreign ministry began citing the event in its own propaganda in March 2020. The Chinese asserted that U.S. Army personnel might have brought the virus to Wuhan from Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md., where the U.S. Army bioresearch program is based. That didn't make sense because the first outbreak was in Wuhan, not Maryland. But the Trump team never took it any further than that.

"We were aware in the administration of the Chinese government's misinformation campaign accusing the U.S. military of bringing covid to Wuhan at those games, which obviously we didn't take seriously and didn't consider to be a good-faith effort to get to the bottom of it," David Feith, a former State Department official, told me. "To the extent there are now or there were all along credible reports of sick athletes from those games, we should certainly chase them down and learn more."

If the Biden administration is as serious as it claims to be regarding investigating the pandemic's origins, it must go back and test all the U.S. military personnel who were in Wuhan for antibodies and then attempt to trace any outbreaks that might have come from their trip to the games. Other countries with athletes who got sick

must do the same. It's true, the value of the data may have waned over time, because antibodies dissipate and tracing is more difficult. But it's still worth trying, and there's no honest argument for ignoring this issue.

Determining the timeline of the outbreak is crucial to understanding the origins of the pandemic — and to getting a clearer focus on the scope of the Chinese government's coverup. The politics don't matter. It's a matter of national security and public health.

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