The NIH must not cancel awarded grants for purely political reasons

On May 1, 2020, *Science Magazine* reported the cancelation of a major grant to the EcoHealth Alliance, an international collaboration studying how coronaviruses transmitting in bats can evolve to spread in human populations. Based on emails reviewed by *Science*, this decision appears to be directly related to the Trump administration’s belief in the conspiracy theory that the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the cause of COVID-19, was purposefully or accidentally released from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The Wuhan Institute of Virology was a participant in the EcoHealth Alliance grant that was canceled.

We ask for the immediate reinstatement of the grant to EcoHealth Alliance and for a congressional investigation into the decision making process at the NIH that canceled the funding in the first place. A vibrant community of independent scientists is crucial to a functioning democracy and will be the first line of defense against another crisis that costs as many lives as the COVID-19 pandemic.

To be clear, there is no evidence of human engineering of the SARS-CoV-2 virus nor of accidental release of a laboratory viral strain. Phylogenetic analyses clearly support the evolution of the SARS-CoV-2 virus from bats in the wild.

We write in strong condemnation of political interference in scientific grantmaking. The NIH has a long and well-established protocol for scoring and funding grants, including decisions on scientific merit, productivity, and the import of research by large panels of expert scientists. During the course of an NIH grant, alterations in funding are incredibly disruptive to ongoing research projects, many of which span years if not decades.

Cancelation of a grant mid-term will disrupt the progress of research in how coronaviruses can evolve to infect humans, the exact process that birthed SARS-CoV-2, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide. This research was always critical given the possibility of a coronavirus pandemic; it is now absolutely essential to understand how this crisis originated and to avoid another pandemic in the
future. Bowing to conspiracy theories in this time of crisis to prevent necessary research may, therefore, be sowing the seeds of another crisis in the future.

In fact, the grant to EcoHealth Alliance provided critical data — including the sequences of closely related bat coronaviruses to SARS-CoV-2 — that both helped identify the origin of COVID-19 and identified remdesivir as a potential drug for the disease, allowing it to be rapidly moved into clinical trials. It is absurd and horrifying that the Trump administration would shut down a research program that led to the first promising treatment for COVID-19.

Beyond the critical importance of the research the NIH defunded, political interference in grantmaking is a disturbing trend that would allow politicians to effectively squash research that does not align with their political desires. Industry influence in research, the silencing of climate science, and long term harm of American science in the global climate become increasingly likely if politicians can easily meddle in grantmaking. We must stand united as a community of clinicians, scientists, activists, and citizens to demand the best — most transparent — scientific decision making process in this moment of crisis, and always.

**Signed:**

**Organizations Signed On:**

COVID-19 Working Group, New York City
The PrEP4All Collaboration
AVAC – AIDS Vaccine Advocacy Coalition
ICAP at Columbia University
ACT-UP
AIDS Foundation Chicago
Universities Allied for Essential Medicines (UAEM)
Center for Science in the Public Interest
Equity Forward
National Black Leadership Commission on Health
Association of Nurses in AIDS Care
Progressive Doctors
Black AIDS Institute
Latino Commission on AIDS
Treatment Action Group
AIDS Action Baltimore
Individuals Signed On:

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Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons
Gregg Gonsalves, Yale School of Public Health
Sten H. Vermund, Yale School of Public Health
Martin S. Hirsch, Harvard University
Seth Darst, The Rockefeller University
Anthony Eller, Yale AIDS Program
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Ted Cohen, Yale School of Public Health
Nathan Grubaugh, Yale School of Public Health
Robert Heimer, Yale School of Public Health
Taiga Christie, Yale School of Public Health
Eli Fenichel, Yale University
Samy Galvez, Yale University
David Vlahov, Yale University
Nathan Price, Yale University
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Donald Thea, Boston University School of Public Health
Jerry Avorn, Harvard Medical School
Julia Marcus, Harvard Medical School
Aaron Kesselheim, Harvard Medical School/Brigham and Women's Hospital
Ameet Sarpatwari, Brigham & Women's Hospital/Harvard Medical School
Robyn Lee, Harvard School of Public Health
Keletso Makofane, Harvard University
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Grace Mosley, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
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Nicole Carter, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine
Sarah Horst, Johns Hopkins University
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Mila González , Columbia University/ NewYork Presbyterian Hospital
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Daniel Mucida, The Rockefeller University
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Hannah Frank, Stanford University
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Jayme Morris, Cooper University Hospital
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Elisa Mandell Keller, EMK Strategic Consulting
Olivier Pernet, EnViro International Laboratories
Susan Tsang, American Museum of Natural History
Jonathan Silver, AstraZeneca
Alexi Grousis-Henderson, Audubon
Dr Alison Cameron, Bangor University
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Suzanne Vogel
Tracy Wells
Amy Reese
Bella Berly
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Robert Goodwin
Michael Sheehy
Brianne Barker
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John Howard
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Racquel Kim Sherwood
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