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Opening Statement

Select Subcommittee on the Corona Virus Pandemic

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Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Ruiz, Members of the Committee: thank you for this opportunity to discuss intelligence and the origins of the covid pandemic.

I have spent most of my adult life as an intelligence analyst or as a manager of intelligence analysts. I have also taught analytical skills to hundreds of new analysts.

To be a good intelligence analyst you have to have the ability to deal with ambiguity. Very often analysts are asked to address issues for which there may not be a final definitive answer. Analysts tend to live in a world where there may be several possibilities, each with its own degree of certainty and uncertainty.

This can be very frustrating to policy makers who want an answer. Given the available intelligence and our own expertise, a specific answer cannot always be determined.

This seems to be the case at this point in terms of the origins of the coronavirus in China. There has not been sufficient intelligence to date to make a firm judgment as to whether the virus occurred naturally or was the result of activity in a lab, whether witting or accidental. The ODNI's October 2021 *Declassified Assessment on Covid-19 Origins* reflects this uncertainty:

- Four intelligence agencies assess that the virus originated naturally, with low confidence.
- One intelligence agency believes the virus originated in a lab, with moderate confidence.
- Three intelligence agencies are unable to make a determination either way.

Again, this can be frustrating to policy makers but that is the nature of intelligence. One of the points that I stress to new analysts is that you want the reader, the policymaker, to understand and appreciate your *uncertainty* as well as your certainty, because they will be making decisions based on your analysis and you do not want to portray a confidence and certainty that misrepresents your intelligence.

Absent greater cooperation and transparency from China – which seems highly unlikely – we may never resolve this issue with certainty.

It is important that we look back at the intelligence and policy experience from the pandemic and ask ourselves what we can do better next time. I have a few recommendations:

- We should consider creating a National Intelligence Officer for Health issues, who, with his or her office, would serve as a focal point for U.S. intelligence collection and analysis efforts not only on health issues that threaten the United States but also looking at health issues worldwide that can be destabilizing regionally.
- The Intelligence Community likely needs to hire analysts with backgrounds in medicine, epidemiology, etc. There is a section of the Centers for Disease Control that has TS/SCI clearances but I think the larger Intelligence Community needs more in-house expertise in these areas.
- Finally, it is important to avoid politicizing intelligence efforts on issues like the Covid pandemic. The Intelligence Community prides itself on being non-partisan and objective and I believe we meet those standards on a high consistent basis. Intelligence may sometimes be discomforting and may even run counter to preferred policy preferences but this does not mean that it is partisan or subjective.
- It becomes increasingly difficult for intelligence officers to do their best work when they are put under consistent partisan pressure or when they are consistently accused of being partisan.
- Some people refer to the role of the Intelligence Community as “telling truth to power.” I find that phrase objectionable as it is very arrogant and, more to the point, we do not have “truth” in many cases but well-sourced, well-thought-out analytical conclusions. These will sometimes run counter to the preferred views or outcomes of policymakers. This does not mean that the intelligence has been politicized; it means that intelligence is being honest when talking to power. That is a great responsibility and the Intelligence Community takes it very seriously.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.