

# From Wuhan to Pearl Harbor: State Department Officials Warned of Existential Threat to America

By Kenneth Quinn - April 22, 2020

It has not been a particularly good time during recent years to be a career diplomat at the State Department. Events surrounding the removal of the American ambassador to Ukraine and comments attacking civil servants as part of the “deep state” have significantly buffeted the foreign service of the United States, leading to many resignations and early retirements.

It should be a morale builder at Foggy Bottom since it was reported that, once again, at a critical moment in our modern history, it was two foreign service officers who provided the most important early warning about a potential ominous national security disaster. Thanks to Josh Rogin of the Washington Post, we now know that two years ago, messages were sent to Washington by career foreign service officers based in China, showing serious deficiencies in procedures at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The laboratory, where research into a coronavirus that is carried by bats was being conducted, had collaborative relationships with several American universities and had also received funding from the federal government.

The State Department cables dispatched by those foreign service officers warned that the breakdown in safety practices at the laboratory might risk leading to a deadly outbreak similar to severe acute respiratory syndrome. To redress these issues and to prevent any future pandemic, the embassy sent messages to Washington that urged increased financial support from the United States to the Wuhan Institute of Virology through the Galveston National Laboratory in Texas. In retrospect, this advanced warning on this danger to the United States, sent from the front lines of the global health security battle by those dedicated career diplomats, could be one of the most consequential events of the history of this catastrophic pandemic.

While there is no concrete evidence that the coronavirus originated from this facility, a point emphasized by China, there is reasonable speculation that, given such breakdown in security, unintentional transmission of the coronavirus to a human likely took place inside that research center. That individual, this analysis continues, then carried the novel coronavirus out into the city of Wuhan, from which it began its frightening global spread. It has infected more than two million people all across the world and has now claimed more than 46,000 lives in its invasion of the United States.

As a retired career foreign service officer, I felt pride as I read that story in the Washington Post. It showed that professional diplomats, working at a great distance from home, discovered and reported information that was so vital to our national security. It also reminded me of another time that a career foreign service officer sent an early warning to Washington about a

potential extreme threat to our safety and freedom. Back in early 1941, the embassy in Tokyo passed a secret cable with information uncovered by an American diplomat that, in the event that relations with the United States deteriorated, Japan planned to unleash a military attack on Pearl Harbor.

Ten months in advance of that infamous devastating aerial assault in the Pacific Ocean in late 1941 that unfortunately took our country by surprise, one career foreign service officer provided critical information that should have left us prepared. Instead, just as it apparently would be repeated less than eight decades later in China, that prescient warning went unheeded, and the United States was unprepared for a devastating sneak attack that would eventually lead to this global pandemic impacting millions of lives.

The American diplomatic corps sustains a rich history dating back to the Revolutionary War. Those two foreign service officers who reported from the Wuhan Institute of Virology have added a new chapter to this legacy.