

## Smallpox scenario: War on the world

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They named it Dark Winter. In June of last year an all-star cast including top health experts, former senator Sam Nunn as the president, David Gergen as national security advisor and James Woolsey reprising his former job as CIA director, took part in a deadly serious government exercise which simulated a terrorist attack.

The terrorists' weapon of choice was the Variola smallpox virus. A coordinated release of the supposedly eradicated virus in the enclosed air of Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Georgia shopping malls resulted in more than 3 million cases of smallpox in 25 states during the first 90 days. The death toll had rocketed past an estimated 1 million by the time the exercise at Andrews Air Force Base was concluded.

Unlike anthrax, which is not contagious, smallpox is spread through the accompanying flu-like symptoms and rashes which resemble chicken pox. People receiving a vaccination prior to exposure are provided almost complete protection from smallpox and can be effectively immunized up to four days into the nearly two-week incubation period.

And there's the rub. The Dark Winter simulation — and long, deadly experience — has demonstrated that even though the disease is less contagious than, for example, the measles, it can nevertheless spread rapidly before health officials are even aware of its appearance.

The World Health Organization triumphantly declared in 1980 that the disease had been eradicated after a systematic and determined global effort. Nearly a decade earlier, in 1971, smallpox had become so rare in the United States that routine vaccinations were discontinued. Officially, only two repositories of deep-frozen Variola virus remained in secure facilities, one in Koltsovo, Russia, and the other at the US Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Since then the CIA has learned that far more samples of the virus may exist in a variety of countries including China, Cuba, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, India, the former Yugoslavia and additional sites in Russia (and that a number of Russian bio-warfare specialists are "missing"). Most troubling, according to a 1998 report, is that clandestine stocks probably remain in both North Korea and Iraq.

Just last year, CIA director George Tenet told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network was not only trying to obtain biological weapons but was also training terrorists in their use. The warning was

repeated last June, three month before the Sept. 11 attacks, and additional evidence was released in July.

Experts argue over the likelihood of such an attack and Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson has stated that "the probability of an intentional release of the smallpox virus is low." But while downplaying the threat, the government is also moving without delay to acquire over 285 million doses of smallpox vaccine by the end of next year, according to Thompson, "just to be prepared."

Surely the al-Qaida terrorists must realize that the highly contagious nature of smallpox — and the extreme mobility of the modern society they both envy and hate — virtually guarantees that any biological assault on the United States would rapidly spread to parts of the world that are far less equipped than this country to fight off the disease.

A smallpox outbreak onto the Third World — much of it Moslem — would result in a death toll of unimaginable proportions. Yet even that prospect may be insufficient deterrence to the mass murders of thousands. In the US embassy bombings in August 1998, al-Qaida killed over 200 Africans, wounding an additional 4,000 more, in an effort to strike a blow against the "Great Satan" of America.

Those who would unleash such a disaster would liken themselves to the rats scurrying off sailing ships returning from the East in the 14th century, bringing plague infested fleas to the unsuspecting population of Europe. In the pandemic which followed, the Black Death's toll reach such hideous proportions that sometimes there were not enough people left alive to bury the dead.

Smallpox is a weapon with effects that would engulf not only the target, but those who would use it — the ultimate example of "blowback." The reintroduction of smallpox into humanity would indeed be a declaration of war on the world.

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