

“BioSecurity”: The Policies of Secrecy and Deceit

Meet Homeland Security's New Bioterror Czarina

By [Tom Burghardt](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

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In the wake of the 2001 anthrax attacks, successive U.S. administrations have pumped some \$57 billion across 11 federal agencies and departments into what is euphemistically called “biodefense.”

Never mind that the deadly weaponized pathogen employed in the attacks didn’t originate in some desolate Afghan cave or secret underground bunker controlled by Saddam.

And never mind that the principal cheerleaders for expanding state-funded programs are Pentagon bioweaponeers, private corporations and a shadowy nexus of biosecurity apparatchiks who stand to make a bundle under current and future federal initiatives.

Leading the charge for increased funding is the Alliance for Biosecurity, a collaborative venture between the Center for Biosecurity of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center ([UPMC](#)) and Big Pharma.

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2005, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader William Frist, a Bushist acolyte, baldly stated that “The greatest existential threat we have in the world today is biological” and predicted that “an inevitable bioterror attack” would come “at some time in the next 10 years.”

Later that year, Frist and former House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) covertly inserted language into the 2006 Defense Appropriations bill (H.R. 2863) that granted legal immunity to vaccine manufacturers, even in cases of willful misconduct. It was signed into law by President Bush.

According to [Public Citizen](#) and [The New York Times](#), Frist and Hastert benefited financially from their actions; the pair, as well as 41 other congressmen and senators owned as much as \$16 million in pharmaceutical stock. [SourceWatch](#) revealed that “the Biotechnology Industry Organization ([BIO](#)) is purported to be the key author of the language additions. This trade association represents virtually all major vaccine manufacturers.”

The Senate Majority Leader’s alarmist jeremiad at Davos was seconded by Dr. Tara O’Toole who added, “This [bioterrorism] is one of the most pressing problems we have on the planet today.”

Really? Not grinding poverty, global warming or the lack of access by hundreds of millions of impoverished workers and farmers to clean water, an adequate diet, health care or relief from epidemic levels of preventable diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis or diarrhea, but “bioterrorism” as narrowly defined by securocrats and their academic accomplices.

But Dr. Victor W. Sidel, a founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility ([PSR](#)) and an outspoken critic of the Bioweapons-Industrial-Complex challenged O'Toole's hysterical paradigm.

Sidel made the point that there is a fundamental conflict between the state's national security goals and health care providers' professional responsibilities to patients. He wrote in 2003 that "military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies and personnel have long histories of secrecy and deception that are contrary to the fundamental health principles of transparency and truthfulness. They may therefore be unsuitable partners for public health agencies that need to justify receiving the public's trust."

In this context, the choice of O'Toole as the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Undersecretary of Science and Technology is troubling to say the least. As former CEO and Director of UPMC's Center for Biosecurity, critics charge that O'Toole's appointment will be nothing short of a disaster.

No ordinary policy wonk with an impressive résumé and years as a government insider, O'Toole is a key player advocating for the expansion of dual-use biological weapons programs rebranded as biodefense.

Subverting the Biological Weapons Convention

The resuscitation of American bioweapons programs are facilitated by their secretive and highly-classified nature. Under cover of academic freedom or intellectual property rights, the U.S. Bioweapons-Industrial-Complex has largely been outsourced by the state to private companies and contractors at top American corporations and universities.

Efforts to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) by the inclusion of verification language into the treaty and regular inspection of suspect facilities by international experts have been shot-down since 2001 by the Bush and now, the Obama administrations. Why?

Primarily because the United States view onsite measures as a threat to the commercial proprietary information of multinational pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies as well as to America's reputedly "defensive" biological programs; initiatives that continue to work with nature's most dangerous and deadly pathogens.

In fact, the problem of the dual-use nature of such research is a conundrum facing critics who challenge the break-neck expansion of concealed weapons programs. Simply put, military activities can be disguised as commercial research to develop medical countermeasures without anyone, least of all the American people, being any the wiser.

Highly-trained microbiologists deployed across a spectrum of low-key companies, trained for academic, public health, or commercial employment are part of the dual-use problem. Who's to say whether scientists who genetically-manipulate pathogens or create Frankenstein-like chimera disease organisms (say, synthesized Marburg or Ebola virus as has already been done with poliovirus in a U.S. lab) are engaged in treaty-busting weapons research or the development of life-saving measures.

And what about the accidental, or more sinisterly, the deliberate release of some horrific new plague by a scientist who's "gone rogue"? As researcher Edward Hammond pointed out:

British researchers pled guilty in 2001 to charges that they improperly handled a genetically engineered hybrid of the viruses causing hepatitis C and dengue fever. British authorities characterized the virus as “more lethal than HIV”. ‘Dengatitis’ was deliberately created by researchers who wanted to use fewer laboratory animals in a search for a vaccine for Hepatitis C. Under unsafe laboratory conditions, the researchers created and nearly accidentally released a new hybrid human disease whose effects, fortunately, remain unknown; but which may have displayed different symptoms than its parents and thus been difficult to diagnose, and have required a new, unknown treatment regime. (Emerging Technologies: Genetic Engineering and Biological Weapons, [The Sunshine Project](#), Background Paper No. 12, November 2003)

A new [report](#) by the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation has charged that despite restrictions under the BWC prohibiting the development, production, stockpiling and use of weaponized disease agents such as anthrax, smallpox or plague, as well as equipment and delivery systems intended for offensive use, the rapid growth of “biodefense and research programs over the last decade” has placed “new pressure” on efforts to curb the development of banned weapons listed in the treaty.

In an [interview](#) with *Global Security Newswire* Gerald Epstein, a senior fellow with the hawkish Center for Security and International Studies (CSIS) told the publication, “When one is doing bioresearch and biodefense, one has to be careful to not overstep the treaty itself.”

He cited the U.S biodefense effort Project Bacchus—an investigation by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency to determine whether it was possible to build a bioweapons production facility using readily available equipment—as an instance where questions were raised if the treaty had been violated.

The type of biodefense activity that is most likely to raise questions regarding treaty compliance is “threat assessment,” the process of determining what type of biological attacks are most likely to occur, he told *Global Security Newswire*. A dangerous biological agent could inadvertently be developed during such research, Epstein said. (Martin Matishak, “Biodefense Research Could Violate Weapons Convention, Report Warns,” *Global Security Newswire*, August 20, 2009)

But Pentagon bioweaponeers did more than build “a bioweapons productions facility using readily available equipment.” They built banned weapons. According to Jeanne Guillemin, author of *Biological Weapons: From the Invention of State-Sponsored Programs to Contemporary Bioterrorism*, the Pentagon and CIA made and tested a model of a Soviet anthrax bomb and created an antibiotic-resistant strain of anthrax.

After consulting with scientists who strongly suggested that the CIA anthrax bomb project would violate the BWC, “CIA lawyers decided the project was within the allowed realm of defensive research,” Guillemin revealed. Project Clear Vision, a joint investigation by the CIA and the Battelle Memorial Institute, under contract to the Agency, reconstructed and tested a Soviet-era anthrax bomblet in order to test its dissemination characteristics. The Agency “decided the same” for the small, fully functional bioweapons facility built under the rubric of Project Bacchus.

The third initiative, Project Jefferson, led to the development of an antibiotic-resistant strain of anthrax based on a Soviet model. After the outgoing Clinton administration hesitated to

give the CIA the go-ahead for the project, the Bush regime's National Security Council gave the Pentagon permission. "They believed" Guillemin wrote, "the Pentagon had the right to investigate genetically altered pathogens in the name of biodefense, 'to save American lives'."

Shortly thereafter, the Pentagon authorized the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), one of the most secretive and heavily-outsourced Defense Department branches, to re-create the deadly anthrax strain.

What the scope of these programs are today is currently unknown. We do know however, that based on available evidence the Department of Homeland Security, the Defense Department and the oxymoronic Intelligence Community, using the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as a cover, continue to investigate the feasibility of transforming nature's most deadly pathogens into weapons.

In close coordination, the United States government and their outsourced corporate partners are spending billions of dollars on research and simulation exercises, dubbed "disaster drills" by a compliant media, to facilitate this grisly trade.

Secrecy and Deceit

That the official bioterror narrative is a preposterous fiction and swindle as even the FBI was forced to admit during its much-maligned Amerithrax investigation, is hardly worth a second glance by corporate media beholden to the pharmaceutical industry for advertising revenue; call it business as usual here in the *heimat*.

As we now know, the finely-milled anthrax powder which killed five people and shut down representative government didn't come from the Afghan-Arab database of disposable Western intelligence assets known as al Qaeda, but rather from deep within America's own Bioweapons-Industrial-Complex, to wit, from the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Ft. Detrick in Maryland. But such troublesome and inconvenient truths are barely worth a mention by "respectable" media, e.g. the corporate stenographers who sold two imperialist military adventures to the American people.

Indeed, a credible case can be made that without the anthrax attacks, the fear levels gripping the country in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist events—and the subsequent clamp-down that followed, from the USA Patriot Act to the indefinite detention and torture of "terrorism" suspects, and from warrantless wiretapping to the demonization of dissent—may very well have been impossible.

It is difficult not to conclude that from the beginning of the affair, there was a clear intent on the part of the anthrax terrorist(s) to draw a straight line between 9/11 and the anthrax mailings. From there, it was but a short step to stitching-up a case for "regime change" in Iraq. The media's role in this criminal enterprise was indispensable for what *Salon's* Glenn Greenwald has [called](#) "the single greatest, unresolved media scandal of this decade." As Greenwald points out,

During the last week of October, 2001, ABC News, led by Brian Ross, continuously trumpeted the claim as their top news story that government tests conducted on the anthrax—tests conducted at Ft. Detrick—revealed that

the anthrax sent to [former Senator Tom] Daschle contained the chemical additive known as bentonite. ABC News, including Peter Jennings, repeatedly claimed that the presence of bentonite in the anthrax was compelling evidence that Iraq was responsible for the attacks, since—as ABC variously claimed—bentonite “is a trademark of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein’s biological weapons program” and “only one country, Iraq, has used bentonite to produce biological weapons.” (Glenn Greenwald, “Vital unresolved anthrax questions and ABC News,” Salon, August 1, 2008)

Despite ABC News’ claims that their information came from “four well-placed and separate sources,” they were fed information that was patently false; as Greenwald avers, “No tests ever found or even suggested the presence of bentonite. The claim was just concocted from the start. It just never happened.”

And as we will shortly explore below, the dubious “Dark Winter” and “Atlantic Storm” bioterror exercises designed by Dr. Tara O’Toole freely drew from the neocon’s sinister playbook, right down to the weaponized smallpox supplied to al Qaeda by Saddam.

Whether or not one buys the current permutation of the “lone nut” theory, this one alleges that Dr. Bruce Ivins, a vaccine specialist employed by USAMRIID, was the anthrax mailer; the fact is, when all is said and done the attacks, to use a much over-hyped phrase, were an *inside job*.

And like other “lone nuts” who have entered the parapolitical frame at their own peril, Ivins isn’t around to refute the charges.

The Alliance for Biosecurity: Insiders with a Mission and (Very) Deep Pockets

Before being pegged by the Obama administration to head DHS’s Science and Technology division where she will oversee the department’s billion dollar budget, with some 45 percent of it going towards chemical and bioweapons defense, O’Toole, as previously mentioned, was the CEO and Director of UPMC’s Center for Biosecurity, a satrapy which describes itself as “an independent organization dedicated to improving the country’s resilience to major biological threats.”

How “independent”? You make the call!

According to their [web site](#) The Alliance for Biosecurity is “a collaboration among the Center for Biosecurity and 13 pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies whose mission is to work in the public interest to improve prevention and treatment of severe infectious diseases—particularly those diseases that present global security challenges.”

Alliance partners include the usual suspects: Bavarian Nordic; Center for Biosecurity of UPMC; Cangene Corporation; DOR BioPharma, Inc.; DynPort Vaccine Company LLC, a CSC company; Elusys Therapeutics, Inc.; Emergent BioSolutions; Hematech, Inc., a subsidiary of Kyowa Kirin; Human Genome Sciences, Inc.; NanoViricides, Inc.; Pfizer Inc.; PharmAthene; Siga Technologies, Inc.; Unither Virology LLC, a subsidiary of United Therapeutics Corporation. Rounding out this rogues gallery are associate members, the spooky Battelle Medical Research and Evaluation Facility and the Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute.

Among the chief activities of the Alliance is lobbying Congress for increased funding for the

development of new drugs deemed “countermeasures” under the [Project BioShield Act of 2004](#), previously described by [Antifascist Calling](#) as a particularly grotesque piece of Bushist legislative flotsam.

The Alliance avers that “the United States faces unprecedented risks to national security ... by the clear and growing danger of bioterrorism or a destabilizing infectious disease pandemic,” and that “our nation’s vulnerability to biothreats is so severe” due to the fact that “most of the vaccines and medicines that will be needed to protect our citizens do not now exist.” Therefore, countermeasures needed to mitigate nebulous biothreats never spelled out *once* in the group’s literature “will likely require several years and several hundred million dollars *each* to successfully develop and produce.” (emphasis added)

An Alliance [report](#), *The State of Biosecurity in 2008 and Proposals for a Public/Private Pathway Forward*, charts a course for “improving and accelerating” efforts to “develop medical countermeasures (MCMs) for the nation’s Strategic National Stockpile (SNS).”

Under the Project BioShield Act of 2004, Congress authorized \$5.6 billion over ten years “to purchase MCMs for the SNS.” Funds were allocated for the procurement of the anthrax vaccine as well as for “therapeutic antibodies for inhalational anthrax, a botulism heptavalent antitoxin, a smallpox vaccine, and several products for radiological and nuclear threats, obligating a total of about \$1.9 billion of the \$5.6 billion BioShield fund.”

In 2006 as I noted previously, Congress created the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). BARDA was authorized to spend some \$1.07 billion over three years for MCMs, “only \$201 million has been provided by Congress through FY 2008” noted the Alliance, “approximately one-fifth of the authorized level.”

According to an “independent economic analysis” carried out by (who else!) the Alliance’s academic partner, the Center for Biosecurity, “it would require \$3.4 billion in FY 2009 to support one year of advanced development.”

“Similarly” according to the organization, “the original appropriation of \$5.6 billion for Project BioShield is equally insufficient to ensure that once MCMs are developed there will be funds available to procure them and maintain the stockpile.” Indeed, “this level of funding would need to be sustained for many years.” You can bet however, that Alliance lobbyists are busy as proverbial bees in pressuring Congress to fork over the dough!

The report state’s that Alliance goals necessarily entail instilling “a sense of urgency ... with Congress” by hyping the “bioterror threat.” But there’s much more here than a simple cynical exercise at preparing the “public diplomacy” ground through academic and industry “message force multipliers” that will enable Congress to shower Big Pharma with a veritable tsunami of cash. A “risk-tolerant culture” should be promoted within BARDA, one that “understands the realities, risks, timelines, and costs of drug development.”

The “risks” to whom and for what purpose are not enumerated, but one can be certain that a “risk-tolerant culture” crafted by industry insiders will come at the expense of the health and safety of the American people, one that pushes potential legal liability should things head south onto the taxpaying public.

The stealth nature of Alliance recommendations are clearly spelled out when they aver that

“stakeholders” should “focus more on the potential biothreats and the corresponding countermeasures, rather than the price tag” and that BARDA, ostensibly a public agency, should be packed with insiders “who have drug development and manufacturing experience.” This will lead to the development of “a culture that is focused on partnering with industry and academia.”

But the bottom line as always, is the corporatist bottom line for Alliance shareholders! How else can one interpret their statement that emerging “biothreats” are all the more dire today now that “interest of the public and private capital markets in biodefense has declined over the last 2-3 years.” What better way then, to beef-up those sagging capital markets than to install an industry-friendly individual at DHS with a documented track record of overplaying the “bioterror threat.”

Dark Winter

O’Toole was the principal designer of two “tabletop” bioterror preparedness drills, the 2001 Dark Winter exercise and the 2005 Atlantic Storm run-through; both were criticized by scientific experts as fabrications of an alleged threat of a smallpox attack mounted by al Qaeda.

Reviewing Milton Leitenberg’s 2005 [report](#), *Assessing the Biological Weapons and Bioterrorism Threat*, published the U.S. Army War College’s Strategic Studies Institute, protein chemist Dr. Eric Smith [wrote](#) the following:

Of note is Leitenberg’s dissection of the process of assessment as practiced through bioterrorism threat scenarios conducted by the US government and private think tanks. Exercises like Dark Winter, which modeled an “aerosolized” smallpox attack, Top Off 2 and 3, both on pneumonic plague strikes, and Atlantic Storm, an exercise that purported to show an al Qaida group manufacturing a dry powder smallpox weapon, were rigged. In the cases of Dark Winter and the Top Offs, transmission rates of disease were sexed up beyond historical averages so that “a disastrous outcome was assured” no matter any steps taken to contain outbreaks. Eight pages are reserved to pointedly condemn the Atlantic Storm exercise on a host of sins which can generally be described as a bundle of frank lies and misinformation coupled with a claimed terrorist facility for making smallpox into a weapon that even state run biological warfare operations did not possess. And once again, juiced transmission rates of disease were employed to grease theoretical calamity. The reader comes to recognize the deus ex machina—a concoction or intervention added to dictate an outcome, in these cases very bad ones—as a regular feature of the exercises. However, the results of the same assessments—the alleged lessons learned—have never been reported with much, if any, skepticism in the media. (Eric Smith, “A Vaccine for the Hype: Milton Leitenberg’s new ‘Assessing the Biological Weapons and Bioterrorism Threat,’” *Global Security, National Security Notes*, March 31, 2006)

In criticizing “the fancy that such attacks are easy and one of the most catastrophic threats faced by the American people,” Smith denounces the alarmist scenarios of Dark Winter and Atlantic Storm’s designers—people like Dr. Tara O’Toole and the coterie of industry insiders and other well-paid “experts”—as guilty of perpetrating a massive “fraud ... and a substantial one” on the American people.

While one of Atlantic Storm’s architects proclaimed “this is not science fiction” and that “the

age of Bioterror is now..." Leitenberg and Smith denounce O'Toole's spurious claims as "not the least bit plausible."

Leitenberg wrote that "well before October-November 2001, the spectre of 'bioterrorism' benefitted from an extremely successful sales campaign." Indeed, hyped-up scenarios such as Dark Winter and Atlantic Storm that place "weapons of mass destruction" in the hands of shadowy, intelligence-linked terror outfits like al Qaeda provided "inflated predictions that ... were certainly *not* realistic. Much worse, in addition to being wrong, inflated predictions were counterproductive. They induced interest in BW in the wrong audiences."

But the implausible nature of the scenarios deployed in national exercises hardly prohibited the Bioweapons-Industrial-Complex from concocting scarecrow-like straw men designed to sow terror amongst the American people while extracting regular infusions of cash from Congress.

Among the eight exercises analyzed by Leitenberg between 1998-2005, he found that *each and every one* were fraudulently designed and the threat of bioterrorism had been framed as a rationalization for "political action, the expenditure of public funds for bioterrorism prevention and response programs," that could "not occur without it." This is "not benign," Leitenberg concludes.

A second consequence of sexed-up "bioterror" drills have even more ominous implications for the immediate future. Because of national security state perceptions that mitigation of catastrophic bioterrorism is of supreme importance for national survival—perceptions reinforced by academic, corporate and militarist peddlers of crisis—"the US biodefense research program appears to be drifting into violation" of the Biological Weapons Convention. This is a menacing development and has happened, I would argue precisely *because* the evaluation process which justifies research into biological weapons threat capabilities and scenarios, are repackaged to conceal the *offensive* thrust of this research as wholly *defensive* in nature, which it certainly is not.

How else would one explain ongoing research funded by the National Institutes of Health to study botulism toxin, "with the added qualification" Smith points out, that because the protein toxin is "unstable, therefore there will be collaboration with other researchers to stabilize it." The NIH grant "means preparing a much more effective botulinum toxin than had been available before."

Smith goes on to cite "another problematical breakout" offered by two scientists to study the "aerobiological" characteristics of the lethal Marburg and Ebola viruses. How this is "defensive" in nature, in keeping with research restrictions under the Biological Weapons Convention, is another instance of a backdoor move to kick-start illicit bioweapons development.

According to Smith, the study "looks to define how the organisms can be aerosolized, an instance of research into examining vulnerability in the complete absence of a verified threat." But I would argue that showering taxpayers dollars into such dark and troubling research tributaries deploy hyped-up threats as cover for the development of illegal weapons.

When her nomination was announced in May, Rutgers University and homeland security critic Richard Ebright told [Wired](#),

“This is a disastrous nomination. O’Toole supported every flawed decision and counterproductive policy on biodefense, biosafety, and biosecurity during the Bush Administration. O’Toole is as out of touch with reality, and as paranoid, as former Vice President Cheney. It would be hard to think of a person less well suited for the position.”

“She was the single most extreme person, either in or out of government, advocating for a massive biodefense expansion and relaxation of provisions for safety and security,” he adds. “She makes Dr. Strangelove look sane.” (Noah Shachtman, “DHS’ New Geek Chief is a Bioterror ‘Disaster,’ Critics Charge,” *Wired*, May 6, 2009)

And Dr. Smith told *Wired* that exercises designed by O’Toole and her colleagues show her to be “the top academic/salesperson for the coming of apocalyptic bioterrorism which has never quite arrived.”

As noted above, “[She’s] most prominent for always lobbying for more money for biodefense, conducting tabletop exercises on bioterrorism for easily overawed public officials, exercises tweaked to be horrifying,” Smith told *Wired*.

But Smith goes even further and denounces O’Toole as an industry shill who “has never obviously appeared to examine what current terrorist capabilities have been... in favor of extrapolating how easy it would be to launch bioterror attacks if one had potentially unlimited resources and scientific know-how.” It’s a “superb appointment if you’re in the biodefense industry and interested in further opportunity and growth.”

“Alternatively” Smith avers, O’Toole’s appointment is “a disaster if threat assessment and prevention” has “some basis in reality.”

Not that any of this matters in Washington. The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee led by “independent Democrat” and arch neocon Sen. Joseph Lieberman, voted to send her nomination to the full Senate July 29.

Tom Burghardt is a researcher and activist based in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to publishing in Covert Action Quarterly and [Global Research](#), his articles can be read on [Dissident Voice](#), [The Intelligence Daily](#), [Pacific Free Press](#) and the whistleblowing website [Wikileaks](#). He is the editor of Police State America: U.S. Military “Civil Disturbance” Planning, distributed by [AK Press](#).

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