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Trends. Terrorism and Biological Warfare: A Problem of Perspective

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How to best deter or manage a biological warfare (BW) attack by terrorists? One school of thought embraces the development of vaccines against well-known BW agents such as smallpox and anthrax. Another school of thought advocates against vaccine development and for the stockpiling of antibiotics and the developing and frequent exercising of emergency medical systems. A controversy between the two schools concerns the ease, attractiveness, availability, and cost of employing lesser known and unknown BW agents--including mutations of the known ones. The former school views the employment of lesser-known and heretofore unknown BW agents as much less likely than the latter school.

An important social psychological Issue is that the controversy and the very topic of BW terrorist attack--by their very nature involving inferences about mass psychology and mass behavior--are being aired in public forums such as newspapers, television programs, and panel discussions. As well, the operations, communications, physical, and personnel securities of classified concepts of operations--requiring foreknowledge of many implementers throughout the United States and beyond--have extreme vulnerabilities. As a result, terrorists can become very well informed about strategies and tactics of BW deterrence and threat management--and take contrary action.

Antiterrorist and counterterrorist authorities, then, need to develop a plan that can be effective even when its features are immediately and inevitably compromised. Seen in this light, immunizations of large populations, e.g., military personnel, against one known BW agent--e.g., a common variant of anthrax--appears to be no more than crude public relations, a domestic political gambit, and a waste of limited finances. (See Anthrax vaccinations: Saddam wins again. (May 1,1998). IBPP, 4(17); A Strategic Defense Initiative against biological warfare: Sense? Nonsense? Mal vu, mal dit? (March 13, 1998). IBPP, 4(10); Biological warfare as psychological warfare. (March 13, 1998). IBPP, 4(10); Broad, W.J., & Miller, J. (August 7, 1998). Germ defense plan in peril as its flaws are revealed. The New York Times, pp. A1, A12; Buchanan, H.L. (1997). Poor man's A-bomb? United States Naval Institute Proceedings, 123, 83-86; Cole, L.A. (1996). The specter of biological weapons. Scientific American, 275, 60-65; Domestic preparedness program in the defense against weapons of mass destruction. (May 1, 1997). United States Department of Defense Report to the Congress.) (Keywords: Biological Warfare, Counterterrorism, Military Strategy, Terrorism.)