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Trends. Security, Stigma, and Biological Weapons

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Title: Trends. Security, Stigma, and Biological Weapons

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the political psychology of security concerns pertaining to unclassified information relating to biological weapons and/or biosecurity and how it might be used to harm US security.

One string of public discourse in the United States (US) has focused on the protection of unclassified information that might be used to harm US security. One element of this discourse comprises the characteristics of what scientific personnel might be allowed to work with a list of substances that might be used to make biological weapons.

Both discourse and discourse element merit close analysis and discussion--the former because of the reality that unclassified information can be used for harm, the latter because of the reality that certain people should be prevented from working with substances that could be used for harm. In the latter case, however, the problem arises as to what characteristics could serve as valid indicators of unacceptable probability to harm.

Some of the most commonly identified characteristics within public discourse include marijuana smokers, clinical depression, and people from countries labeled as sponsors of terrorism. Yet all three characteristics seem to display problematic validity. Marijuana smokers are engaging in illegal behavior, but where are the data to suggest that this illegal behavior may be predictive of supporting biological warfare development? Would the same case be made for moving vehicle violations or felonious behavior concerning national security decision-making--cf. the case of John Poindexter, who once again has a very sensitive role in the US national security apparatus.

Clinical depression might be a vulnerability for task-related security violations (unintentional or intentional) but all characteristics have vulnerabilities that can be intentionally exploited or serendipitously enjoyed by adversaries.

And certainly a sophisticated adversary can recruit people from countries other than those on a watch list. Moreover, one can easily enough change one's citizenship (or have it changed by others) to a country not on a list.

What seems to be happening is that a process of stigmatization is effecting a distortion of logic in the search for predictive validity. If those who would engage in biological weapons development are bad, then other groups conceived as bad in some way should also be included. Ultimately, this might include everyone except the good perceived in oneself. While catering to narcissistic needs, the process spells doom for security against terrorism with global reach. (See Dotter, D. (2002). Creating deviance: Scenarios of stigmatization in postmodern media culture. *Deviant Behavior*, 23, 419-448; Link, B. G., & Phelan, J. C. (2001). Conceptualizing stigma. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 363-385; Looper, K. (2002). The social psychology of stigma. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 39, 414-415; Schemo, D.J. (January 10, 2003). Scientists discuss balance of research and security. *The New York Times*, P.A12.) (Keywords: Biological Weapons, Biosecurity, Terrorism.)

