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Obama's Bioweapons Program

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The Obama administration's recent declaration on bioweapons would simply be another run-of-the-mill example of our "change" president's duplicity were it not such an unmitigated disaster.

Recapitulating sinister Cold War practices that informed American ruling class consensus when it came to secretly toying with nature's most deadly pathogens, (a) because they could, (b) because it was, and is, highly profitable and (c) because they got with it, the profound failure by the administration to rein-in out-of-control corporate grifters, militarists and scientists thirsting after an endless flow of taxpayer dollars, have put us all on a potential glide path towards the abyss.

Since the roll-out of the Obama product-line January 21, on issues ranging from war and peace to economic justice and from civil liberties to healthcare, the "change" team exhibit the same callous disregard for disarmament proposals that characterized their Bushist predecessors in the Oval Office.

Nowhere is this reality so transparently delineated than by the administration's continuing efforts to derail plans to revitalize the moribund Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), rejecting binding verification protocols that would finally give the 1972 treaty teeth.

"Strengthening" the BWC: Killing it with Kindness

From her perch as U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Ellen Tauscher, a former Democratic congresswoman from the San Francisco Bay Area (in other words, a feckless "liberal" who spent her career paying lip-service to the antiwar sentiments of her constituents–and then voting in favor of every blood-soaked imperialist adventure undertaken by the Bush regime) rejected international monitoring of military and pharmaceutical sites that might employ research for illicit purposes, e.g., the fabrication of banned biological weapons.

"The Obama administration will not seek to revive negotiations on a verification protocol to the convention," Tauscher told delegates December 9 at the annual meeting of the States Parties to the Biological Weapons Convention in Geneva.

The position outlined last week by the administration eerily follows in the footsteps of the previous government. In 2001, there was broad support internationally for revitalizing the BWC draft Protocol; a long, circuitous process undertaken back in 1991.

But during these earlier negotiations, the U.S. Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) released a position paper opposing the routine inspection of laboratories and other research facilities on the grounds of safeguarding "confidential

business information," a position they have reiterated today.

This, along with U.S. Defense Department opposition killed the deal after the American delegation, under instructions from arch neocon John Bolton who then held Tauscher's brief, argued that an international inspections regime would put U.S. "national security" at "risk" by allowing spot checks of suspected U.S. weapons sites.

Revealing a warmer and fuzzier, though no less obstructionist side than blustery Bolton, the Undersecretary mounted a charm offensive in Geneva, touting the National Security Council's (NSC) "National Strategy for Countering Biological Threats" as a major transformation of the U.S. position. It wasn't. Tauscher told delegates: "The United States intends to implement this [NSC] strategy through renewed cooperation and more thorough consultations with our international counterparts in order to prevent the misuse and abuse of science while working together to strengthen health security around the world."

However, not a single word in the 23-page NSC document addresses the vital issue of verification. Indeed, while no-holds-barred inspections of nuclear weapons' facilities undergird international treaties governing the destruction of warheads and missiles, thus ensuring compliance with treaty obligations by states, when it comes to biological weapons the "National Strategy" skirts the question entirely. Why?

While the United States claims that it will "advance policies and practices that establish and reinforce norms against the misuse of the knowledge and capabilities that arise from the life sciences while encouraging their free and open availability for peaceful and beneficial use," a call to "develop and employ complementary and multi-layered systems for influencing, identifying, inhibiting, and interdicting biological threats" does nothing to constrain state or corporate actors from exploiting the life sciences for nefarious ends, to wit, work with dual use select agents that can be diverted into surreptitious weapons' programs.

This is crucial. While the document asserts that America's "relationships with the United Nations, international organizations, foreign governments, and the private sector are critical to the success of our efforts" the fact is, the "private sector" and the secret state's own Defense Department are dead-set against any initiative that give international arms' control monitors access to their facilities.

Claiming that the United States "has carefully reviewed previous efforts to develop a verification protocol," the administration has "determined that a legally binding protocol would not achieve meaningful verification or greater security."

Echoing Tauscher and the NSC's lame reasoning, Barry Kellman, president of the International Security and Biopolicy Institute told The Hill he "agreed," and told the publication "that given the rapid evolution of the biological market, technologies that once could only be made in a laboratory can now be made anywhere, so it would be impossible to verify that a country is holding true to the convention protocols."

Really? Perhaps then, Mr. Kellman would care to enlighten us as to which select agent was used in the first and to date, only, bioterrorist attack of the 21st century, and where pray tell it might have come from.

Editing Out the Secret State: The 2001 Anthrax Attacks

As has generally been accepted by scientific experts and as The Baltimore Sun revealed

back in 2001, “for nearly a decade, U.S. Army scientists at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah have made small quantities of weapons-grade anthrax that is virtually identical to the powdery spores used in the [October 2001] mail attacks.”

Investigative journalist Scott Shane disclosed that Dugway’s Life Sciences Division “made hundreds of kilograms of anthrax for bombs designed to kill enemy troops over hundreds of square miles” during the Cold War.

Indeed, the “extraordinary concentration” of the finely-milled powdered anthrax mailed to the media and members of Congress was “in the range of 1 trillion spores per gram” which “meant that the letter could have contained 200 million times the average dose necessary to kill a person.”

Researchers at Northern Arizona University determined that “the genetic fingerprint of the mailed anthrax is indistinguishable from that of the Ames ‘reference strain,’ which is the strain used most often at Fort Detrick and Dugway, according to a scientist familiar with the genetic work,” the Sun reported.

Years later, former Ft. Detrick deputy commander Richard Spertzel told investigative journalists Bob Coen and Eric Nadler that “the material that was in the Daschle/Leahy letter was “1.5 to 3 microns in particle size” and characterized the refinement “as super sophisticated … phenomenal.” When investigators attempted to examine samples under a microscope, “it readily floated off the slides.”

In other words, the “genetic fingerprint” and “extraordinary concentration” of the weaponized anthrax used in the attack would require a team of individuals, and not a proverbial “lone nut” to produce a biotoxin possessing such exquisitely lethal characteristics. The inescapable conclusion is that the anthrax used to murder five people, sicken dozens of others and terrorize the rest of us, could only have come from a state program or one operating under contract to a government agency.

Could the deadly biotoxin have been diverted from a U.S. defense facility or corporate lab by a group of “black box” scientists operating under the radar for their own nefarious ends, i.e. strengthening the state’s repressive hand within the social-political context of the 9/11 attacks? It is certainly possible and cannot be ruled out.

As I previously reported, Global Security Newswire (GSN) disclosed in June that “a recently completed inventory at a major U.S. Army biodefense facility found nearly 10,000 more vials of potentially lethal pathogens than were known to be stored at the [Ft. Detrick] site.”

According to reporter Martin Matishak, the 9,220 samples discovered “included the bacterial agents that cause plague, anthrax and tularemia; Venezuelan, Eastern and Western equine encephalitis viruses; Rift valley fever virus; Junin virus; Ebola virus; and botulinum neurotoxins.”

While Ft. Detrick’s deputy commander Col. Mark Kortepeter claimed there are “multiple layers of security” and that “a lot of buffers [would] prevent anyone who shouldn’t be in the laboratory from getting in in the first place and then preventing them taking something out with them,” this dodges the question of whether someone who was authorized to be inside Ft. Detrick or any of the other 400 U.S. facilities that have Biosafety Level-3 or Biosafety Level-4 laboratories, could smuggle out deadly toxic substances.

The New York Times reported December 9, that Tauscher rejects a strict regulatory regimen that would monitor state bioweapons research and development because of the "regulatory burdens that verification would place on the American pharmaceutical industry and on the military's bio-defense research activities."

Given the available facts surrounding the 2001 anthrax terrorist incident and the FBI's subsequent cover-up, Tauscher's fear of "regulatory burdens" on the "pharmaceutical industry" and the state's own "bio-defense research activities" are certainly misplaced and should be viewed with suspicion.

Big Pharma and Congress: Best Friends Forever!

While journalists and researchers have explored ethically-challenged relationships amongst former Defense Department officials and the weapons' industry, most recently by USA Today, and have described the oft-cited revolving door as entrée to an exclusive and highly lucrative good 'ol boys club; call it a Beltway version of a retirement village for Pentagon clock-punchers.

Inquiring minds can't help but wonder: does the same clubby atmosphere pervade, and inform, the policy decisions made by denizens of the Bioweapons-Industrial-Complex? Let's take a look!

Take the Alliance for Biosecurity, a Big Pharma lobby shop aligned with the Center for Biosecurity of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC), as a starting point. Self-described as "a collaboration among the Center for Biosecurity and 13 pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies," one "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," one discovers that similar relationships between academia, industry and government abound.

Since Antifascist Calling first reported on Alliance efforts to increase state funding of biotechnology and "biodefense" research in August, all references to the Alliance for Biosecurity have been scrubbed from UPMC's web site. Indeed, all traces of the lobby shop's activities, including group policy statements and testimony before relevant congressional committees have simply vanished.

But why, pray tell, would they take evasive action in the first place? And more importantly, what do they have to hide? As it turns out, quite a lot.

According to The Washington Times, when the Center for Biosecurity's director, Dr. Tara O'Toole, was nominated for her current post as Undersecretary of Science and Technology at the Department of Homeland Security, she had "served as a key adviser for a lobbying group funded by the pharmaceutical industry that has asked the government to spend more money for anthrax vaccines and biodefense research."

Reporter Tim McElhatton disclosed that O'Toole "never reported her involvement with the lobbying group called the Alliance for Biosecurity in a recent government ethics filing." The Washington Times further reported that the Alliance "has spent more than $500,000 lobbying Congress and federal agencies–including Homeland Security–since 2005, congressional records show."

“In written testimony to Congress” according to McElhatton, “Dr. O’Toole said the alliance was ‘created to protect the Center for Biosecurity’s status as an honest broker between the biopharma companies and the U.S. government’.” As is well known, $500,000 buys much in the way of “honesty” in the halls of Congress!

In an October 31 letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) “signed by Dr. O’Toole and two other alliance officials, the group called on Congress to include more than $900 million for the ‘advanced development of medical countermeasures’ to be administered by the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority.”

The Washington Times revealed that the letter was also “signed by the chief executive officer of member company PharmAthene, David Wright, who was one of the two first co-chairmen for the alliance after its creation in 2005.”

McElhatton reported that according to a Securities and Exchange Commission filing “Mr. Wright’s company has a big financial interest in securing work from the authority,” and that “PharmAthene has been trying to win a contract administered by the authority to supply 25 million doses of an anthrax vaccine to the national stockpile.”

According to a press release, the firm announced that PharmAthene “will participate in and present data at the HHS Public Health Emergency Medical Countermeasures Enterprise (PHEMCE) workshop and BARDA Industry Day taking place in Washington, DC Dec. 2-4, 2009.”

Indeed, the PHEMCE work shop “will bring together public and private sector stakeholders for a dynamic dialogue on the current state of medical countermeasure preparedness, PHEMCE initiatives in the past year, and plans for moving forward to enhance national capabilities to respond to a public health emergency.”

When “moving forward” entails the expenditure of nearly one billion dollars for “countermeasure preparedness,” one can be sure that companies on the make will be all ears!

Former Bushist Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, averred that the PHEMCE workshop “is very timely given the WMD Commission’s conclusion that terrorists are much more likely to attack America with a biological weapon than a nuclear weapon.”

Despite the fact that weapons’ experts have not reached a consensus on the Commission’s alarmist report, given the extreme difficulty faced by “terrorists” to fabricate biotoxins into an effective weapon, Thompson claims, “now that our national experts have made this warning clear, we need to take the immediate steps necessary to protect against potential biological attacks against the U.S. homeland. In particular, we need to move forward efforts to build and stockpile appropriate biological countermeasures, such as next-generation anthrax vaccines, recombinant influenza vaccines, and novel antivirals.”

Among the “experts” consulted by the WMD Commission were none other than Dr. O’Toole’s Center for Biosecurity who have called for the expenditure of some $3.4 billion annually on “countermeasure development to reach 90 percent chance of success defending the country against bioterrorism threats.”

Nowhere however, in the PharmAthene press release is it disclosed that the former HHS

Secretary has a proprietary interest in securing federal dollars allegedly to "enhance national capabilities" to better respond "to a public health emergency." Currently, Thompson is the President of Logistics Health, Inc., a firm that does extensive business with the U.S. Department of Defense for what it euphemistically calls "military readiness."

Craig Holman, the legislative director of the watchdog group Public Citizen, said that O'Toole's lack of transparency "definitely and clearly runs counter to the intent of the law."

What was the response by Senate Democrats, quick to denounce the "culture of corruption" of their coconspirators across the aisle? According to The New York Times, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid "slammed Republicans for slowing down, and in some cases, blocking the confirmation of nominees for various posts in the Obama administration."

Neither Reid, nor for that matter the Times, breathed a word about O'Toole's obvious conflict of interest and cosy relationships with biodefense firms she would presumably oversee from her perch at DHS.

Instead, we are lavished with empty rhetoric from Reid who told the Times: "'For that position, [DHS Undersecretary] President Obama nominated an expert in combating both pandemics and bioterror attacks,' Mr. Reid said, adding: 'Imagine that: Americans are bracing against a flu epidemic here at home and threats of terrorism from abroad, the President nominated someone highly experienced in both of those areas, and Republicans are saying no'."

Despite revelations of serious ethical breaches, O'Toole was confirmed by the Senate November 4.

The Ties that Bind (And Pay Handsomely!)

The close proximity of O'Toole, the Center for Biosecurity and now, the Department of Homeland Security to Alliance members such as Bavarian Nordic; Cangene Corporation; DOR BioPharma, Inc.; DynPort Vaccine Company LLC; Elusys Therapeutics, Inc.; Emergent BioSolutions; Hematech, Inc.; Human Genome Sciences, Inc.; NanoViricides, Inc.; Pfizer Inc.; PharmAthene; Siga Technologies, Inc.; Unither Virology LLC, , as well as associate Alliance member, the spooky, CIA-connected Battelle Memorial Institute, might just help explain the Obama administration's opposition to strengthening the BWC.

According to the Center for Responsive Politic's OpenSecrets.org database, the Alliance for Biosecurity have contributed some $600,000 to congressional grifters since 2005 through the Philadelphia law firm Drinker, Biddle & Reath.

While chump change when it comes to assuring that the best congresspeople money can buy stay "on-message," OpenSecrets reports that since 1990, Big Pharma and their allies in the health products industry have spent a whopping $177,030,005 on "influence and lobbying." Breaking down the numbers, the watchdog group avers that the bulk of contributions have benefited Republicans ($111,405,078 or 63%) vs. Democrats ($65,056,643 or 37%).

In The Washington Times piece cited above, ethics groups have said that the Alliance's set-up "is an example of what critics call "stealth lobbying," in which like-minded companies form a loosely knit compact and spend lots of money lobbying the government. The arrangement is legal, but it exposes loopholes that prevent the public from finding out how

much money each company pays and whether one business exerts more control over the others."

Alliance legal counsel Anita Cicero told the paper, "the group is complying with all applicable federal laws" and that the group "does not generate income, does not have a bank account and does not owe taxes." She told the paper the organization "was formed so companies, academic institutions and the government" could work together to "accelerate the development of therapeutic and vaccine countermeasures."

"Countermeasures" that markedly add to the corporatist bottom line.

As Antifascist Calling previously reported, the National Biodefense Science Board (NBSB), chock-a-block with industry insiders and academic shills, posted an August 11 notice buried in the Federal Register.

Rescued from oblivion by the whistleblowing intelligence and security web site Cryptome, we were informed that NBSB's "Market & Sustainability Work Group" seek to hand over even more cash to industry partners.

Seeking public comment on the group's working document, "Inventory of Issues Constraining or Enabling Industry Involvement in Medical Countermeasure Efforts," NBSB is seeking to further "streamline" the Food and Drug Administration's already lax review process in a move meant to further "incentivize" industry by "increased federal funding for advanced development, in the form of cost-reimbursement contracts and rewarding private-capital investments with milestone payments at procurement."

Under NBSB's proposal, the drug industry stands to grab "reimbursement of development costs + 15%, with return-on-working-capital at 22%, and cost-of-money-for-capital at 15%."

If said corporate patriots swing into action during a national emergency, then "compensation if commercial product(s) during emergencies (e.g., lost sales, market share, delayed licensing" are fully paid by the federal government. Talk about a robust "public-private partnership" in action!

But wait, there's more!

GSN reported in October that Alliance member Human Genome Sciences Inc. had earned $160 million from the federal government for sales of its ABthrax vaccine, despite a Food and Drug Administration report that stated although the product performed better than a placebo (!) "it is still unknown how well these models and results predict efficacy in humans." Despite these equivocal findings, "Washington has placed an order for 65,000 doses of ABthrax for the country's emergency medicines reserve."

Now that's what I call a streamlined review process!

Earlier in October, GSN disclosed that Alliance member Emergent BioSolutions won $4.9 million in funding from the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, a branch of the National Institutes of Health, "for the development of a new anthrax vaccine that could require only two doses to provide protection."

As investigative journalists and filmmakers Bob Coen and Eric Nadler revealed in Anthrax War and a companion book, Dead Silence: Fear and Terror on the Anthrax Trail, Emergent

BioSolutions has a very interesting pedigree indeed.

When the State of Michigan auctioned off the Michigan Biological Products Institute (MBPI) in 1998, standing in the wings with a check for $24 million were Lebanese financiers Ibrahim El-Hibri and son Fuad, "an international telecom magnate" according to Coen and Nadler. During this period, the firm the El-Hibri's had founded after scooping-up MBPI for a song, BioPort, "held the exclusive contract to provide the U.S. government with the anthrax vaccine, and that in addition to the physical plant, the Michigan sale included $130 million in contracts with the Department of Defense."

During their investigation, Coen and Nadler learned "that the El-Hibris had participated in the privatization of portions of the United Kingdom's leading biodefense facility, Porton Down, a decade earlier" and that "with the acquisition of the Michigan plant, the family had planted stakes in the only two leading anthrax vaccine producers in the West." What makes this particularly troubling according to Coen and Nadler, is the fact that the "El-Hibri's did not have science backgrounds or biotech business experience before the Porton takeover–but were clearly canny investors."

Alarmingly, "the troubling fact [was] that the sale of MBPI to BioPort had transferred control of a sensitive government program to a network of companies, one of which was headquartered in the Dutch Caribbean."

Indeed, "Fuad El-Hibri himself informed Congress in 1999 that the controlling shareholder in BioPort–Intervac LLC–was partly owned by I and F Holdings NV, a Netherlands Antilles investment company owned by his father."

None of this troubled Congress in the least since, as Coen and Nadler relate "no one on the House Committee on Government Reform asked him if El-Hibri senior had any partners in I and F Holdings." These disturbing facts led the investigative journalists to wonder: "Who actually owned the largest anthrax vaccine manufacturing plant in the West, if not the world? Who really knew."

Fast forward a decade and according to GSN BioPort, now Emergent BioSolutions, "is the producer of BioThrax, the only vaccine licensed by the Food and Drug Administration for the prevention of anthrax disease. The company is also developing other anthrax treatments and countermeasures against diseases such as botulism and hepatitis B." Funds for developing the vaccine were provided "through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009."

Last month, GSN revealed that Alliance member, Danish firm Bavarian Nordic will receive some $40 million for a freeze-dried version of the firm's Imvamune vaccine for smallpox. GSN reported that "Bavarian Nordic has received $680 million in contracts for Imvamune from the U.S. government. Washington has ordered 20 million doses of the vaccine in its liquid-frozen form and has the option of buying another 60 million," according to a company press release.

This, despite the fact that smallpox has disappeared as an international public health threat. However as the Sunshine Project's Edward Hammond revealed in Emerging Technologies: Genetic Engineering and Biological Weapons, when a U.S. research team at the State University of New York in Stony Brook synthesized poliovirus "from scratch," the responsible bioresearch community were alarmed.

Hammond commented that "the experiment exemplifies possibilities that generate real problems if similar techniques become applicable to agents such as smallpox. Today it is unlikely (though not completely impossible) that countries apart from Russia and the USA have access to smallpox virus. This is the basis of the current threat assessments with regard to smallpox, which rate the likelihood of a smallpox attack very low. Should it become possible in a few years to build smallpox virus in the laboratory, the situation would be turned upside down. The relative security that can be assumed today (at least for most countries in the world) will evaporate."

Since Hammond's piece first appeared in 2003, is it plausible that synthetic smallpox could have been ginned-up in a top secret U.S. research facility, hence contingency planning by secret state officials to have a freeze-dried, hence longer-lived vaccine on hand? We don't know.

Examining only the three above-named firms, OpenSecrets reports that since 2000, Human Genome Sciences has expended some $24 million since 2002 for lobbying; Emergent BioSolutions has spent some $10.9 on lobbying efforts since 2003, and Bavarian Nordic has spent some $21.7 lobbying Congress since 2002.

Given the enormous outlay of taxpayer largesse to firms that have profited handily under the Project BioShield Act of 2004, a grotesque piece of Bushist legislative flotsam, and the nearly $60 billion dollars reported by the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation spent on so-called biodefense by the federal government, one can only conclude that lobbying activities by Big Pharma is an investment well-spent!

Keep in mind too, that the expenditure of federal dollars for Project BioShield and related programs do not include black budget allocations concealed by the CIA and Pentagon under a welter of above top secret Special Access Programs, a subject that Antifascist Calling will explore in future reports.

Conclusion

As the Sunshine Project's Edward Hammond has warned: "Rapid developments in biotechnology, genetics and genomics pose a variety of environmental, ethical, political, and social questions. And because they open up tremendous new possibilities for biological warfare, these technological developments have grave implications for peace and security."

We must view the Obama administration's cynical opposition to strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention because of the "regulatory burdens that verification would place on the American pharmaceutical industry and on the military's bio-defense research activities" as a dire international public health emergency, one which University of Illinois constitutional law professor Francis Boyle, the author of the 1989 Bioweapons Anti-Terrorism Act, has called "a catastrophe waiting to happen."

We proceed blindly along this path at our own peril.

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