

Pentagon Poised To Resume Open Air Weapons Testing

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Pentagon Appears Poised To Resume Open-Air Testing Of Biological Weapons But Says It Has Received No Presidential Directive To Break Moratorium

The Pentagon has denied President Bush issued a directive for it to resume open-air testing of chemical and biological warfare (CBW) agents that were halted by President Richard Nixon in 1969. Yet, the Pentagon's stated preparations make it appear it is poised to do just that.

Spokesperson Chris Isleib did not respond to a request for comment on a passage from the Defense Department's annual report sent to Congress last April that suggests the Pentagon is gearing up to resume the tests.

Resumption of open-air testing would reverse a long-standing moratorium adopted after a public outcry against them following accidents in the Sixties.

The Pentagon's annual report apparently calls for both the developmental and operational "field testing of (CBW) full systems," not just simulations.

The Pentagon's report to Congress contains the following passage: "More than thirty years have passed since outdoor live-agent chemical tests were banned in the United States, and the last outdoor test with live chemical agent was performed, so much of the infrastructure for the field testing of chemical detectors no longer exists or is seriously outdated. The currently budgeted improvements in the T&E infrastructure will greatly enhance both the developmental and operational field testing of full systems, with better simulated representation of threats and characterization of system response." "T&E" is an acronym for testing and evaluation.

"Either the military has resumed open-air testing already or they are preparing to do so," said Francis Boyle, a University of Illinois Professor of International Law who authored the implementing legislation for the U.S. Biological Weapons Convention signed into law by President George Bush Sr. and who has tracked subsequent developments closely.

"I am stunned by the nature of this development," Boyle said. "This is a major reversal of policy." The 1972 treaty against germ warfare, which the U.S. signed, forbids developing weapons that spread disease, such as anthrax, a pathogen that is regarded by the military as "ideal" for conducting germ warfare.

"The Pentagon is fully prepared to launch biological warfare by means of anthrax," Boyle charged. "All the equipment has been acquired and all the training conducted and most combat-ready members of U.S. armed forces have been given protective equipment and

vaccines that allegedly would protect them from that agent.”

Open-air testing takes research into deadly agents out of the laboratories in order to study their effectiveness, including their aerial dispersion patterns, and whether they actually infect and kill in field trials. Since the anthrax attacks on Congress in October, 2001, the Bush administration has funded a vast biological research expansion at hundreds of private and university laboratories in the U.S. and abroad involving anthrax and other deadly pathogens.

The anthrax attacks killed five people, including two postal workers, injured 17 others and temporarily shut down the operations of the U.S. Congress, Supreme Court, and other Federal entities.

Although a Federal statute permits the president to authorize open-air testing of CBW agents, Boyle said this “does not solve the compliance problem that it might violate the international Chemical Weapons Convention and the Biological Weapons Convention as well as their related domestic implementing legislation making such violations crimes.”

Boyle charged the U.S. is already “in breach” of both conventions and also of U.S. domestic criminal law implementing them. In February, 2003, for example, the U.S. granted itself a patent on an illegal, long-range biological-weapons grenade, evidently for offensive purposes.

Boyle said the development of anthrax for possible offensive purposes is underscored by the government’s efforts “to try to stockpile anthrax vaccines and antibiotics for 25-million plus Americans to protect the civilian population in the event there is any ‘blowback’ from the use of anthrax in biowarfare abroad by the Pentagon.”

“In theory,” Boyle added, “you cannot wage biowarfare abroad unless you can protect your civilian population from either retaliation in kind, or blowback, or both.” Under Project BioShield, Homeland Security is spending \$5.6 billion to stockpile vaccines and drugs to fight anthrax, smallpox, and other bioterror agents. The project had been marked by delays and operational problems and on December 12th last year Congress passed legislation to pump another \$1 billion into BioShield to fund three years of additional research by the private sector.

Boyle said evidence the U.S. has super-weapons-grade anthrax was demonstrated in the October, 2001, anthrax mail attacks on Senators Thomas Daschle(D-S.D.) and Patrick Leahy(D-Vt.) The strain of highly sophisticated anthrax employed has allegedly been traced back to the primary U.S. Army biological warfare campus at Ft. Detrick, Md. The attacks killed five persons and sickened 17 others. A current effort to expand Ft. Detrick has sparked widespread community opposition, according to a report in the Baltimore Sun.

“Obviously, someone working for the United States government has a stockpile of super-weapons grade anthrax that can be used again domestically for the purposes of political terrorism or abroad to wage offensive warfare,” Boyle said.

The Associated Press has reported the U.S. Army is replacing its Military Institute of Infectious Diseases at Ft. Detrick “with a new laboratory that would be a component of a biodefense campus operated by several agencies.” The Army told AP the laboratory is intended to continue research solely for defense against biological threats.

Undercutting the argument U.S. research is for “defensive” purposes is the fact government scientists have been creating new strains of pathogens for which there is no known cure. Richard Novick, a professor of microbiology at New York University, has stated, “I cannot envision any imaginable justification for changing the antigenicity of anthrax as a defensive measure.” Changing a pathogen’s antigenicity means altering its basic structure so that existing vaccines will prove ineffective against it.

Biological warfare involves the use of living organisms for military purposes. Such weapons can be viral, bacterial, and fungal, among other forms, and can be spread over a large geographic terrain by wind, water, insect, animal, or human transmission, according to Jeremy Rifkin, author of “The Biotech Century”(Penguin).

Boyle said the Federal government has been plowing money into upgrading Ft. Detrick, Md., and other CBW facilities where such pathogens are studied, developed, tested, and stored. By some estimates, the U.S. since 2002 has invested some \$43 billion in hundreds of government, commercial, and university laboratories in the U.S. for the study of pathogens that might be used for biological warfare.

According to Rutgers University molecular biologist Richard Ebright, more than 300 scientific institutions and 12,000 individuals have access to pathogens suitable for biowarfare and terrorism. Ebright found that the Number of National Institute of Health grants to research infectious diseases with biowarfare potential shot up from 33 in the 1995-2000 period to 497 by 2006. Ebright has stated the government’s tenfold expansion of Biosafety Level-4 laboratories, such as those at Fort Detrick, raises the risk of accidents and the diversion of dangerous organisms. “If a worker in one of these facilities removes a single viral particle or a single cell, which cannot be detected or prevented, that single particle or cell can form the basis of an outbreak.”

During the Cold War era, notably in the Fifties and Sixties, various Government agencies engaged in open-air CBW testing on U.S. soil and on naval vessels at sea to study the effects of weaponized pathogens. U.S. cities, including New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, were among the targets and sickness and even a number of deaths were reported as a result.

According to an article titled “Lethal Breeze” by Lee Davidson in the Deseret News of Salt Lake City of June 5, 1994, “In decades of secret chemical arms tests, the Army released into Utah winds more than a half million pounds of deadly nerve agents.” Among them, he said, was VX, a pinhead-sized drop of which can be lethal. The tests were conducted at Dugway Proving Ground but Davidson said the evidence suggests “some (agents) may have escaped with the wind.”

Pentagon documents obtained by the News listed 1,635 field trials or demonstrations with nerve agents VX, GA and GB between 1951 and 1969, “when the Army discontinued use of actual nerve agents in open-air tests after escaped nerve gas apparently killed 6,000 sheep in Skull Valley,” Davidson wrote. The Skull Valley strike also sickened a rancher and members of his family. Boyle has previously charged the Pentagon with “gearing up to fight and ‘win’ biological warfare” pursuant to two Bush national strategy directives adopted in 2002 “without public knowledge and review.” He contends the Pentagon’s Chemical and Biological Defense program was revised in 2003 to implement those directives, endorsing “first-use” strike of chemical and biological weapons in war.

The implementing legislation Boyle wrote that was enacted unanimously by Congress was known as the Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989. Boyle has written extensively on the subject. Among his published works are "Biowarfare and Terrorism" and "Destroying World Order: U.S. Imperialism In the Middle East Before and After September 11th," both from Clarity Press.

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