

New breeds of test-tube terror

Whatever happened to naughty Col. Khadady's poison gas plant? Just a few weeks ago, this was the big threat to western Christianity. Since then, the story seems to have dropped from Page 1 into oblivion.

So, are we still in mortal danger from those wicked Libyans? I don't know and I doubt if anyone else does either. But do ponder the following: If such supposedly grave perils can vanish off the news pages as quickly as they came, perhaps we are falling victims to hysteria. One day it's AIDS, the next, killer humidifiers, the next, mad Moammar and his green gas of death.

Still, there's no doubt that many Third World nations are hard at work concocting toxic gases—their version of the poor man's nuclear weapons. What is even more worrisome, and more menacing, is the rapid development by many Third World nations of biotoxic germ weapons.

To do this, you send some of your brightest chemistry and biology students to western universities. After they earn a few degrees, it also helps to have them work in western research and manufacturing labs.

Back home, the star pupils are put to work assembling a nasty collection of traditional, military-oriented germs. Old favorites are botulism, anthrax, tularemia, Rocky Mountain spotted fever and assorted forms of plague.

Germ warfare scientists are particularly fond of animal diseases. Human bodies have a rough time dealing with animal sicknesses, such as anthrax or tick fevers. Parakeet fever, for example, killed about 2 million people in the 1920s. Botulism is superbly deadly, but hard to keep virulent and peppy. But these "old" germs often don't spread well and are undependable. Protective gear, breathing devices and inoculations will usually protect against them.

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But now, thanks to the wonders of modern biotechnology, new breeds of "super-germs" are being cooked up in labs around the world. This is a prospect that ought to give us all the willies.

Take your western-trained scientist with his collection of old germs. Next, using recumbent RNA/DNA technology, you splice part of an old toxin onto a common, household virus and—voilà!—the super biotoxin is born.

A good example of such a hybrid biotoxin is a nasty flu virus—say the one we seem to have had all this winter—combined with anthrax. The likely result would be a new disease that spreads from person to person with the wildfire speed of the flu, yet which causes anthrax's massive devastation to the body. In other words, the very worst of both worlds. Or, mix botulism with flu or some other virus, and you have a more stable compound than the original botulism, and one that's jet-propelled.

Equally bad, conventional vaccinations or antibiotics may not work against these new, killer mutants. Even more scary, the designer biotoxins will also be able to penetrate many kinds of protective wear and respirators. Perhaps worst of all, anyone with a few PhDs, a well-stocked lab complex and cash can probably assem-

ble some of these killer mutants. Or, at least buy components for final assembly.

According to latest reports from the intelligence community the following nations are already researching such killer biotoxins: The USSR, China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Israel and the U.S. This, alas, is a problem that won't go away. Like chemical weapons, the genes of biotoxins is out of the bottle and can't be put back in again. And a biotoxin lab is even easier to hide than a chemical plant. In fact, identifying such installations could prove extremely difficult.

Which brings us to Star Wars. Here the U.S. is still planning to spend billions to protect against a ICBM attack while there is no way as yet to counter the threat of biotoxic weapons.

If I were a mad dictator with a score to settle with the U.S., I'd do the following: Pack a steamer trunk full of biotoxins, put some TNT underneath, and pay a drug runner to ship it into Florida. As one wit recently noted, if the U.S. can't stop mountains of drugs from coming into the U.S., how are they going to stop Soviet missiles?

Seriously, all that it takes to hold a nation under the sword is the threat that an enemy agent will dump some mutant biotoxin into the water supply. One bottle of flu-anthrax in Israel's Lake Tibertias would poison much of the national water supply. Or a few bottles in Lake Michigan would shut down large parts of the industrial Midwest and cause a gigantic panic.

How can we even be sure that supplies of biotoxins haven't already been hidden in North America, waiting for the day when the order goes out from Moscow, Beijing, Tripoli or Havana?