



BIOTERROR

Movie review by Manuel Michel

October 1, 2007

OVERVIEW:

Following the 9/11 terrorist and the anthrax mail attacks in 2001, the threat of bioterrorism has become an issue that attracts considerable attention and creates concern at all levels of society. As the general public learns of the risks and dangers associated with bioterrorism, they search for answers to many unresolved questions. In an effort to further explain the issue and risks associated with bioterrorism, numerous movies, books, websites, discussion groups, and materials have been created. *BioTerror* is an investigative documentary based on the history of biological warfare. This fact-based film features three reporters as they investigate the creation of biological warfare, the current status of this perplexing issue, and the potential risks for future attacks.

ACTORS:

In view of the fact that this is a documentary, there are no actors per se. However, the main characters of the documentary are the three New York Times reporters who together co-authored [Germs: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War](#); they are William Broad, Stephen Engelberg, and Judith Miller. In addition to their commentary, the three reporters also interview United States and the former Soviet Union (USSR) scientists, William Patrick, Ken Alibek and Sergei Popov, who were each involved in the development of the biological weapon programs in their respective countries.

STRUCTURE AND OUTLINE:

The documentary gives a general overview of biological weapons. It then focuses on the following: 1) the history and development of biological weapons and the strategies originally used in the creation of these weapons; and 2) the current status of preparedness, defense against such attacks, and other deterrent measures that are currently being taken.

1) History: From 1943 to 1969 the United States was directly involved in the development of offensive biological warfare. This research was conducted mainly at Fort Detrick in Maryland. During this time, twenty-eight (28) biological pathogens were transformed into usable weapons. The most promising of these pathogens as a bio-weapon was respiratory anthrax. However, in 1969 President Nixon ended the program, and along with 100 other countries signed the internationally recognized 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, which banned any further development and use of biological weapons. However, during this same time period (1940's to 1970's) the USSR was also developing its biological weapons program. Surprisingly, although the USSR also signed the Biological Weapons Convention, ten years after signing the treaty, the USSR was operating the largest biological weapons production facilities in the world. According to scientist interviews, these USSR facilities produced enough biological agents to kill the world nine to ten times over.

In addition to the mass production of biological agents, USSR scientists also worked on developing new weapons by taking synthetic DNA and combining it with the most dangerous traits of each organism in order to create a superior biological weapon. Because the United States stopped research in 1969, the USSR was twenty to thirty years ahead of the United States in the research and development of biological weapons.

2) Strategies and Current Status: The scientists interviewed discuss how biological weapons were designed, the strategies for use, and various issues related to dispersal techniques. It mentions that currently, the production of biological agents is not that difficult to accomplish.

The more difficult obstacle is the creation of an effective and reliable method of mass dispersing the biological agents.

Perhaps the most notable segment of the documentary is when reporter Judith Miller visits the former Soviet Union's biological weapon laboratories and production facilities in Kazakhstan. Although these facilities are no longer operational, some of the biological agents that were created are still available and being stored at locations with minimal security measures.

The role of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program is also discussed. This is an international effort to re-assign 1,000 to 2,000 biologists and other scientists, who were previously involved in the development of biological weapons, into more diplomatic work and research. The importance of this program is stressed due to the threat that there are twelve countries and numerous terrorist organizations that are interested in hiring these scientists in order to continue developing biological weapons.

Finally, another unsettling piece of information presented in the documentary is that, as of 2002, the United States was still not prepared to handle a large scale domestic bioterrorism attack. Mock biological emergencies were conducted to determine how the current national internal response system would function during a bioterrorism attack. In summary, the studies showed that we are unprepared to deal with a biological attack. The documentary stresses that in order to address these problems the United States needs to: 1) create a better medical response system, 2) develop better air testing technology, and 3) develop a better system to stockpile medicines and vaccines.

CINEMATOGRAPHY, LIGHTING, & MUSIC

Since this is a documentary, the film is based entirely on interviews and on-site investigation. Overall, the cinematography and lighting are adequate. There was no music or theme songs that are associated with this production.

OPINION:

Most of the documentary focuses on the biological warfare programs of the United States and the former Soviet Union. Perhaps the three most noteworthy topics uncovered in the documentary are: 1) the US considered using biological weapons on Cuba, 2) the threats created by the collapse of the former Soviet Union, and 3) the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program.

It is surprising to learn that both the United States and the USSR had policies and strategies to develop and use biological weapons. Even more remarkable is the fact that the United States considered using biological weapons during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Although ambiguously stated, the documentary eludes to the strategy of using biological weapons to weaken Cuban soldiers without causing fatalities.

Although it has since become global policy to stop the development and production of biological weapons, these actions created critical consequences that must still be addressed. An example of this is the risk that biological weapons and the knowledge to develop them can easily fall into the wrong hands. This is perhaps the most disturbing knowledge gained from the documentary. However, because of these threats, there are now defensive approaches being implemented in order to deter potential future attacks. Such programs include the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, in which former USSR scientists have been assigned to work on more diplomatic projects.

MOVIE RATING & CONCLUSION:

BioTerror scores 4 out of 5 in its health and biodefense values, and 3 out of 5 in its scope of legal and policy issues. By far, the strongest value of this documentary is the health and biodefense content. The on-site location visited in Kazakhstan creates a feeling of immediate urgency in addressing the risks and hazards that still exist today. In addition, interviewing the scientists that were involved in these programs adds credibility to the importance of the issue.

Although *BioTerror* is a good general overview of bioterrorism, the documentary fails to expand on certain key factors related to bioterrorism. One example is the 1984 salmonella poisoning in Oregon, where approximately 750 people were purposefully infected. This creates a doubt on what other important information may have been overlooked. Perhaps the reason for this is that the documentary was created in 2002 when there was more focus on international bioterrorism threats, instead of domestic bioterrorism.

A further shortcoming is that legal and policy issues are not explained in more detail. Historical policies are mentioned, but most other legal and legislative matters are ignored or briefly mentioned. Because most of the focus is on the United States and the USSR, the documentary could have focused more on applicable international treaties and conventions. Another issue of importance is whether these former USSR countries, such as Kazakhstan, could be held accountable for any future uses of the biological weapons they helped create. It is unclear if these issues were intentional omitted because the general public is more likely to be interested in the historical and scientific aspect of bioterrorism. Another reason may be that the documentary is relatively short in length and more time was needed to cover additional topics. Finally, because the documentary was recorded in 2002, it includes some out-dated information. Such as statements on whether Iraq possessed biological weapons during the Gulf War, the extensiveness of the threat, and whether these weapons could have been developed and used.

Overall, I would recommend *BioTerror* as introductory material to those interested on the general topic of bioterrorism because it provides an adequate historical perspective. However, in my personal opinion, *BioTerror* raises more questions than it answers, and it creates more anxiety about bioterrorism.