



What would happen if terrorists spread a deadly virus over three states, infecting hundreds of thousands within days? Read the account of "Dark Winter," a government simulation of a bio-terror attack, and how America can save itself from a catastrophe before it strikes.

Dark Winter

Preparing America For Biological Terror

• *Aviva Sternfeld*

The governor of Oklahoma is sitting at an emergency meeting of the National Security Council (NSC), his face etched with deep concern. He barely breathes as he listens to the worsening reports about the latest developments in the smallpox outbreak that has already turned into an epidemic. Reports of infections are growing by the hour.

Oklahoma City's hospitals are staggering under the burden of patients, compounded by many who have come purely out of fear. To make matters worse, many health care workers fail to show up out of concern that they will contract the disease and pass it on to their loved ones. Top state and federal officials sit with furrowed brows as they are forced to make critical decisions to deal with the crisis.

No one knows yet for sure who is behind this terror attack. Who would want to release the deadly virus that is spreading like wildfire? But long before they can stop to consider justice, they must first concentrate on damage control. What can be done to curb the epidemic before more people die?

The governor declares a state of emergency and insists that the president do the same at the federal level. With the terrified population coming closer to anarchy, the governor mobilizes the National Guard to

maintain law and order. He is desperately working on every possible lead to obtain large supplies of the smallpox vaccine as soon as humanly possible. He hopes to be able to announce soon that the vaccine will be available for all of the state's 3.5 million residents within the next 72 hours. The sad truth, though, is that this is a pipe dream. There is no more than a small amount of the vaccine to be found in all of America.

The panic grows exponentially when the news leaks that the outbreak is not limited to Oklahoma. The virus is spreading to several nearby states as well. Based on the rapid pace at which reported infections are pouring in, the death toll can be expected to reach catastrophic proportions in a matter of weeks—as high as the hundreds of thousands!

Local officials throughout the region receive hurried training in the symptoms of smallpox, how it is spread, its incubation period, complications and the mortality rate of its victims. Because smallpox was eradicated so long ago, doctors have virtually no knowledge and absolutely zero experience in treating it. There is no quick and easy means of diagnosing it, to say nothing of treating it. Certainly no one knows how to deal with an epidemic of these proportions.

The situation careens from bad to worse to total catastrophe. It is an absolute nightmare!

Thank G-d this scenario has not occurred. Nevertheless, the possibility of America coming under a bio-terror attack is one that the government takes very seriously. That is why they ran a mock version of a covert and widespread smallpox attack on the United States.

The purpose was to acquaint government officials with the danger of biological terror. They analyzed different scenarios involving diverse diseases and methods of transmission, noting the projected rate of the disease's spread and its expected fatalities. Then they devised appropriate responses: how local and federal officials should react to the emergency, sharing



Andrews Air Force Base, where the Dark Winter simulation was held.

relevant information and which urgent decisions will have to be made.

You are probably assuming that such bio-war games began *after* the 9/11 terror attacks. Actually, the one described above took place beforehand. It was held on June 22, 2001 – less than three months before the Twin Towers collapsed. (Yes, conspiracy theorists jump on that as proof that 9/11 was carried out by the US government—see sidebar.)

Such a simulation involves cooperation and interaction among a number of federal agencies and other institutions. The data for the supposed crisis was carefully researched for months in advance to guarantee that it would be based on true facts and likely estimations. They were based on similar incidents that had occurred in the past, corrected for the time and location. In this manner the rehearsal would be as instructive as possible.

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On June 22 and 23 all of the people with official roles in the drill gathered at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland. Most were chosen from the upper echelons of government. Examples are former US Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, who played the role of American president, and Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, who played... himself. Other officials took on various roles,



Meeting of the National Security Council in the White House.

such as director of CIA and national security advisors.

A group of some 50 officials who are connected to America's biological terrorism policy closely observed the developments as the simulated attack proceeded. The drill, named Dark Winter, took two days. The script it followed involved an incident that would have played itself out over 13 days. The simulated scenario would begin with a localized smallpox terror attack on Oklahoma City that would spiral out of control, spreading ultimately to 25 states and 15 foreign countries and exacting an extremely high death toll.

As when a true crisis occurs, the rehearsal involved meetings of the National Security Council. This was chaired by the "president" and included people representing the vice president, secretary of state, secretary of



A government-sponsored biological attack drill in Paris to test government preparedness for an emergency.