



"The Challenge of Biological Terrorism: When to Cry Wolf, What to Cry, and How to Cry It"

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Speaker: **Anthony Cordesman**, Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic & International Studies

This meeting, jointly sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center's Division of International Security Studies, the RAND Corporation, and the U.S. Army's Eisenhower National Security Series, was part of an ongoing series on terrorism and homeland security.

Anthony Cordesman observed that while the threat of bio-terrorism is serious, our analytical tools for developing a deeper understanding of this challenge are limited. Contemporary efforts to model bio-terrorism suffer from a dearth of hard data (some of which is from empirical experiments conducted over 30 years ago during the Cold War). All too often, this analytical weakness permits discussions of bio-terrorism to devolve into a "science-fiction horror show." Despite the uncertainties in developing firm estimates of their lethality, Cordesman argued that the deadly consequences of a bio-terror attack warrants the inclusion of these capabilities under the rubric of "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD).

Many of the 33 groups designated as foreign terrorist organizations have indicated an interest in acquiring unconventional weapons. According to Cordesman, Al-Qaeda and other such extremist groups have a wide variety of potential agents and delivery means to choose from for chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear (CBRN) attacks. In October 2001, U.S. forces in Afghanistan discovered and destroyed stocks of cyanide, botulinum, and salmonella toxins at an Al Qaeda base, and found evidence of a developing production capability for anthrax. Although Al Qaeda and other extremist groups might aspire to conduct a mass-casualty attack using biological or other WMD capabilities, Cordesman argued that the much more likely contingency is a small-scale bio-terror episode that would not create many casualties and whose consequences would be primarily psychological and economic. The United States and other Western countries must improve their capabilities to warn, detect, defend, and respond to the much more likely contingency of a low-level attack.

Valid attack models are needed to provide the analytical basis for sound public policy choices. The lethality of a disease or toxin, Cordesman argued, cannot be separated from the way in

which it is manufactured, weaponized, and disseminated: "Every step in this chain can radically alter the real-world lethality and effect of such weapons."

In his summary Cordesman asserted that a large-scale, mega-attack employing a biological weapon would be far more difficult to conduct than the post-9/11 conventional wisdom would have us believe. On the other hand, the odds of a low-level attack are high, and the accelerating global diffusion of biotechnology means that the proliferation of these capabilities (including to non-state actors) will be all but impossible to prevent.