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Bracing for Bioterror

A major biological attack could kill or injure millions. We can and should do more to protect our food supplies and distribution systems

by [Greg Blonder](#)

We insure ourselves against unlikely events of many stripes: fires, hurricanes, burglaries, to name a few. Some of these may not happen in a lifetime, but insuring against them offers peace of mind.

But what about events considered "unlikely certainties"—significant occurrences, guaranteed to happen, but at an unspecified, perhaps distant time? An example in the political realm is the death of Cuban leader Fidel Castro. And scientists tell us that global unlikely certainties include a giant asteroid hitting the earth, wiping out much of humanity.

How do we prepare for these kinds of events? Because they're inevitable, we cannot afford to play the odds, avoiding the cost of insurance with the hopes that they'll never occur.

Either we plan ahead, such as by accruing resources and funds to mitigate the disaster's effects, or we self-insure by improvising a response and planning to dig into savings to pay for recovery. Of course, opting for the latter isn't always wise.

Which brings us to the war on terror. I believe any careful observer would conclude that an airplane hijacking, suicide bombing, and even an atomic explosion and a biological attack on American soil can be considered unlikely certainties. In war, if it can be done, it will be done.

So the question becomes: How do we prepare? Specifically, which attack deserves "investment" before the fact? In terms of sheer scale of the devastation, the answer must be biological attack. By comparison, even the massive loss of lives that would result from an atomic bomb would be limited geographically and economically.

WIDSPREAD CONCERN

If present trends continue, within the next decade or so it appears certain we'll undergo a major biological attack that could kill or injure millions of U.S. citizens. Our centralized distribution networks and global sourcing make us uniquely vulnerable.

A virulent disease carried by airline passengers or passed through our food distribution network virtually guarantees the nationwide spread of the attacking biological agent within a matter of days. We've already previewed such an event last summer with the spinach E. coli outbreak, and the more recent rash of pet deaths caused by melamine adulterated feed from China. Don't you worry that it took months to backtrack those poisonings to their source?

Imagine a world in which you couldn't trust the food you eat, the bus you ride on, or the hand you shake—no matter where you live, no matter how far you run. A biological attack, much more devastating than a nuclear

bomb, could set America back a decade.

The tools and knowledge for biological weapons are now widespread. Soon they will be within the reach of any dedicated individual. It won't be a surprise attack. Today's terrorists know practice makes perfect, especially when resources are limited and the risk of failure is high.

In recent years, terrorists have been steadily climbing the ladder of weapon sophistication, from simple shootings to large-scale explosives and, most recently, to chlorine bombs. Before terrorists attack New York, they will likely practice in Somalia.

OVERCOME OBSTACLES

Given the potential size of the threat, what is stopping us from acting to prevent it? One obstacle surely is our collective inability—despite the spinach and pet food contaminations—to admit we are at war and that casualties are inevitable.

Our politicians prefer to spend billions on visible palliatives, such as screening airline passengers' toothpaste tubes for explosives, while spending almost nothing on screening our food supply. In other words, billions of dollars to save a few and only millions to preserve the American way of life.

A second obstacle is the apparent immensity of the preventative task. Rethinking our vast distribution networks seems an insurmountable problem. Where to begin? Some green ideas—such as buying food produced only within a 500-mile radius—indirectly help by localizing the food supply, but when practiced alone are too piecemeal to avert widespread damage.

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