



British American Security Information Council (BASIC)

110 Maryland Ave, NE
Suite 205
Washington DC 20002
Tel: +1 202 546 8055
Fax: +1 202 546 8056

The Grayston Centre
28 Charles Square
London N1 6HT
Tel: +44 207 324 4680
Fax: +44 207 324 4681

Email: basic@basicint.org

Web site: www.basicint.org

Statement to the November 17-18, 2003 Meeting of the Advisory Panel To Assess the Capabilities for Domestic Response to Terrorist Attacks Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction¹

By David Isenberg²

*Senior Analyst
British American Security Information Council*

Good afternoon: Thank you for the opportunity to address you. As you are all well aware federal advisory bodies come and go and, unfortunately, more often than not, do little more than issue reports, which are rarely read, and if they are, are even more rarely acted upon. Your panel, I am happy to say, is of the very rare few that has, for over four years now, met and thoughtfully discussed how to better improve the defense of the American homeland in the new post-9/11 security environment. You are, to use the words of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in it for the “long, hard slog.” It is a privilege to have the chance to offer you the following brief comments.

There should be no mistake about the magnitude of the task now facing America. The defense of the U.S. homeland can be improved but it will not be easy. And there will never be a 100 percent foolproof defense, if for no other reason than the sheer abundance of targets available to potential attackers.³

When the objective is to kill large numbers of people in spectacular fashion and cause panic and disruption, the United States constitutes a “target-rich environment.” The

United States is extremely vulnerable to terrorist attacks. Drugs and illegal immigrants move across U.S. borders with ease; guns and stolen cars move out. Dangerous activities occur in modern society every day. Aircraft take off and land; hazardous materials – flammable, explosive, or poisonous – move by truck, train, and ship.⁴

Domestic Preparedness

Those who have the responsibility of preparing for attacks against the United States can look to the Boy Scout motto for their mission statement, i.e. “be prepared.” Since the actual and potential threat universe is so large, preparedness planning is crucial. Being prepared helps diminish the threat by ensuring that the consequences of attacks are limited in scope – fewer casualties, less panic, minimum disruption – and that recovery efforts proceed smoothly.

Virtually every branch of government, including the military, is involved in domestic preparedness in some way, whether through research and development, training, provision of supplies and equipment, tracking of agents or weapons, or offering assistance during and following an actual attack.

The question for the Department of Homeland Security is how will it institutionalize preparedness at the local level. If preparedness is truly to take hold nationwide on the front lines and be sustained, then the federal government needs to improve its ability to fund local responders. So far, it has had problems. Even when the money was awarded, some state and local governments failed to spend it in a timely way or did not make the relevant equipment readily available to emergency workers.

All types of terrorist attack necessitate similar response sequences: arrival at the scene of the attack by local police, firefighters, and emergency medical services – the “emergency responders.”

These emergency responders are part of state and local governments, not the federal government. This complicates efforts to develop a unified and effective domestic response capability. The myriad state and local jurisdictions result in a crazy-quilt of doctrine, legal authority, equipment and training for emergency responders.

Across the country, state officials involved in such efforts are concerned about what they view as a lack of guidance from Washington. Typically, they have little money, small staffs and widely varying views about what should be done first. In many cases, states decided not to commit any of their own money until the U.S. government begins distributing the money it has promised to state and local security programs. The federal dollars did not start flowing until at least October 2002. And there are no guarantees that the federal money will address some of the states’ most pressing needs.⁵ In fact, a frequently expressed concern is that states will take federal funding and use it to fund their own existing priorities in the absence of proper oversight. However, most states reject such oversight, calling it burdensome red tape.

While it may be true that money does not buy happiness, it is vital to improving homeland security. A survey of 192 cities for the United States Conference of Mayors found that requests for unanticipated, additional security and readiness costs just between Sept. 11, 2001, and Dec. 31, 2001, totaled \$87.65 million. Total costs of providing security in the same cities in 2002 is estimated to be four times as much, \$353.85 million.⁶

Laboratories and biosecurity

I would also like to draw your attention to a danger that ironically arises from our efforts to defend the country against a future biological weapons attack. As you are aware a network of high-security laboratories is being built across the United States as part of Project BioShield.

The laboratories will store and investigate some of the most lethal viruses, but none of the germs to be studied is related to bioweaponry. Earlier this year, after a two-month investigation the UPI wire service found roughly 20 existing high-level biodefense labs and proposals or plans to double that number through new construction and upgrades. Building these labs means deadly pathogens will be more widely dispersed than at any time in U.S. history. Thousands of additional people will have access to them, expanding the risks of leaks and domestic bioterrorism.

According to UPI, each new facility would have an average of 150 to 300 scientists and technicians. The numbers suggest, if all these labs are eventually built, up to 6,000 additional people might have access to some of the most dangerous microbes on Earth, including hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola and other potential bioterrorism agents including anthrax and tularemia.

Meanwhile, the public's ability to know about dangerous research being undertaken in their communities is impaired by the secrecy enveloping ongoing and proposed biodefense. For example, the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston does not want to release the minutes of a key local safety committee that sets and monitors precautions taken during potentially dangerous experiments with recombinant DNA - artificially created DNA - often made by splicing together DNA molecules from different organisms.

Such DNA research will play a significant role in roughly \$10.5 billion worth of Bush administration programs to develop countermeasures against bioterror weapons. Minutes of the meetings of such committees, called Institutional Biosafety Committees, or IBCs, could provide insight into biodefense research, including the degree of risk involved.

Similarly, the federal government is seeking to undertake research at sites that appear to represent poor choices. For example, an article in the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists earlier this year noted that locating advanced bioweapons germ research facilities at secretive nuclear labs could be a serious mistake, especially given the U.S. Department of Energy's poor record in security, safety, and environmental concerns.⁷

This is an area where greater transparency and monitoring – not less -- is needed. In particular, an urgent examination of US biosecurity should be carried out by the General Accounting Office (GAO) to: (a) a review the state of security at the countless government, university, and federal contractor labs where pathogens are studied (to ensure that there are sufficient controls over the construction and running of new laboratories and that they comply with biocontainment standards); (b) verify that government procedures for reviewing and updating the list of controlled agents requiring export licenses is adequate; and (c) explore the prospects for developing an international agreement requiring participating nations to pass laws limiting access to deadly biological agents and setting uniform standards for their security.

¹ This paper draws on previously published works including: *Less Talk, More Walk: Strengthening Homeland Security Now*, published in December 2002 (executive summary can be downloaded from http://www.cdi.org/products/talk_walkES.pdf); and Reducing Vulnerabilities in the US Energy Sector: Back to the Future with President Carter's Energy Policy, Discussion Paper by David Isenberg (Senior Analyst, BASIC) and Dr. Ian Davis (Director, BASIC), Conference on Energy Security, Sponsored by SMI, The Hatton, London, October 9, 2003.

² David Isenberg has worked at BASIC since November 2002. *Less Talk, More Walk* was written while the author worked as an independent consultant on defense and security affairs. From 1998 to 2001, he was an analyst at DynMeridian working on biological weapons arms control issues. From 1989 to 1998, he was a senior research analyst at the Center for Defense Information. He has also worked as a research associate at the Project on Military Procurement and a research fellow at Business Executives for National Security. He is an adjunct scholar at the CATO Institute, associate fellow at the Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, research director of Military Insights, advisor on international security issues to *The World* (one-hour daily international news radio journal produced by BBC World Service, Public Radio International and WGBH Boston) and a member of the Council for Emerging National Security Affairs. He has published more than 100 articles, papers, studies, television script, book reviews, and op-eds on defense, military, arms control, and international security issues, and testified before Congress and at professional military schools. He received his B.A. in International Studies from the University of Oregon and M.A. in International Affairs from American University.

³ Eric Pianin and David S. Broder, "U.S. Still Vulnerable To Attacks, Experts Say," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2001, p. 28; and Richard Simon, "Defense Of The Homeland Comes With Hefty Price Tag," *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 2001; Eric Pianin and Dan Eggen, "Preparations Are Stepped Up For Possible New Terrorism," *Washington Post*, November 1, 2001, p. 3.

⁴ Barry R. Posen, "The Struggle Against Terrorism: Grand Strategy, Strategy and Tactics," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Winter 2001/02, p. 41.

⁵ Kevin Johnson, "U.S. Is All Over The Map On Homeland Defense," *USA Today*, April 23, 2002, p. 1. Also, see the *Protecting Democracy: Summary of States' Response* report of the National Conference of State Legislatures, April 19, 2002, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2002/pr020419.htm>.

⁶ *The Cost of Heightened Security in America's Cities: A 192-City Survey*, The United States Conference of Mayors, January 2002, <http://www.usmayors.org/70thWinterMeeting/securitysurvey.PDF>, p. 2.

⁷ Marylia Kelley & Jay Coghlan, "Mixing bugs and bombs," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September/October 2003, pp. 24-31, <http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/2003/so03/so03kelley.html>.