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FIVE YEARS LATER : New Weapons, New Defenses

The Secretive Fight Against Bioterror

The government is building a highly classified facility to research biological weapons, but its closed-door approach has raised concerns.

By [Joby Warrick](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, July 30, 2006; Page A01

On the grounds of a military base an hour's drive from the capital, the Bush administration is building a massive biodefense laboratory unlike any seen since biological weapons were banned 34 years ago.

The heart of the lab is a cluster of sealed chambers built to contain the world's deadliest bacteria and viruses. There, scientists will spend their days simulating the unthinkable: bioterrorism attacks in the form of lethal anthrax spores rendered as wispy powders that can drift for miles on a summer breeze, or common viruses turned into deadly superbugs that ordinary drugs and vaccines cannot stop.

The work at this new lab, at Fort Detrick, Md., could someday save thousands of lives -- or, some fear, create new risks and place the United States in violation of

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A computer-animated image of the planned building for the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center building to be constructed at Ft. Detrick, Md. (Courtesy of NBACC)

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As the fifth anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks

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international treaties. In either case, much of what transpires at the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center (NBACC) may never be publicly known, because the Bush administration intends to operate the facility largely in secret.

In an unusual arrangement, the building itself will be classified as highly restricted space, from the reception desk to the lab benches to the cages where animals are kept. Few federal facilities, including nuclear labs, operate with such stealth. It is this opacity that some arms-control experts say has become a defining characteristic of U.S. biodefense policy as carried out by the Department of Homeland Security, NBACC's creator.

Since the department's founding in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks, its officials have dramatically expanded the government's ability to conduct realistic tests of the pathogens and tactics that might be used in a bioterrorism attack. Some of the research falls within what many arms-control experts say is a legal gray zone, skirting the edges of an international treaty outlawing the production of even small amounts of biological weapons.

The administration dismisses these concerns, however, insisting that the work of NBACC is purely defensive and thus fully legal. It has rejected calls for oversight by

nears, The Washington Post looks back at how the terror strikes changed the nation's politics, society and culture.

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"Where the research exposes vulnerability, I've got to protect that, for the public's interest," said Bernard Courtney, NBACC's scientific director. "We don't need to be showing perpetrators the holes in our defense."

Tara O'Toole, founder of the Center for Biosecurity at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and an adviser to the Defense Department on bioterrorism, said the secrecy fits a larger pattern and could have consequences. "The philosophy and practice behind NBACC looks like much of the rest of the administration's philosophy and practice: 'Our intent is good, so we can do whatever we want,'" O'Toole said. "This approach will only lead to trouble."

Although they acknowledge the need to shield the results of some sensitive projects from public view, critics of NBACC fear that excessive secrecy could actually increase the risk of bioterrorism. That would happen, they say, if the lab fosters ill-designed experiments conducted without proper scrutiny or if its work fuels suspicions that could lead other countries to pursue secret biological research.

The few public documents that describe NBACC's research mission have done little to quiet those fears. A computer slide show prepared by the center's directors in 2004 offers a to-do list that suggests the lab will be making and testing small amounts of weaponized microbes and, perhaps, genetically engineered viruses and bacteria. It also calls for "red team" exercises that simulate attacks by hostile groups.

NBACC's close ties to the U.S. intelligence community have also caused concern among the agency's critics. The CIA has assigned advisers to the lab, including at least one member of the "Z-Division," an elite group jointly operated with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory that specializes in analyzing and duplicating weapons systems of potential adversaries, officials familiar with the program confirm.

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