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Bioterrorism: A Largely Unrecognized 21st Century Threat

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Bioterrorism: A Largely Unrecognized 21st Century Threat

By Michael Balboni

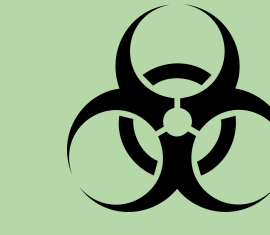
Introduction



Bioterrorism is an old phenomenon but is relatively newly recognized by the vast. For this research, it is defined as the use of biological agents to impose harm and disorder upon populations. Although the use of biological weaponry in the context of warfare dates back centuries ago, its utilization for blatant terror has only become prominent in the past century. Its subtlety, rapid spread, and potential lethality make it a difficult issue to identify and properly handle. Furthermore, health and law enforcement organizations have demonstrated consistent under-preparedness for such attacks, heightening their devastating effects on populations. A lack of efficient methods to identify the origins of outbreaks and pacify their dispersion and impacts has been detrimental to the public. Lastly, the tools needed to perform an effective bioterrorist attack are minimal — both cheap and easy to obtain. Even so, developing microbiological technology has the potential to be utilized for reasons other than to benefit unhealthy individuals; they can be manipulated for ill-intended purposes...for bioterrorism.



Discussion & Analysis

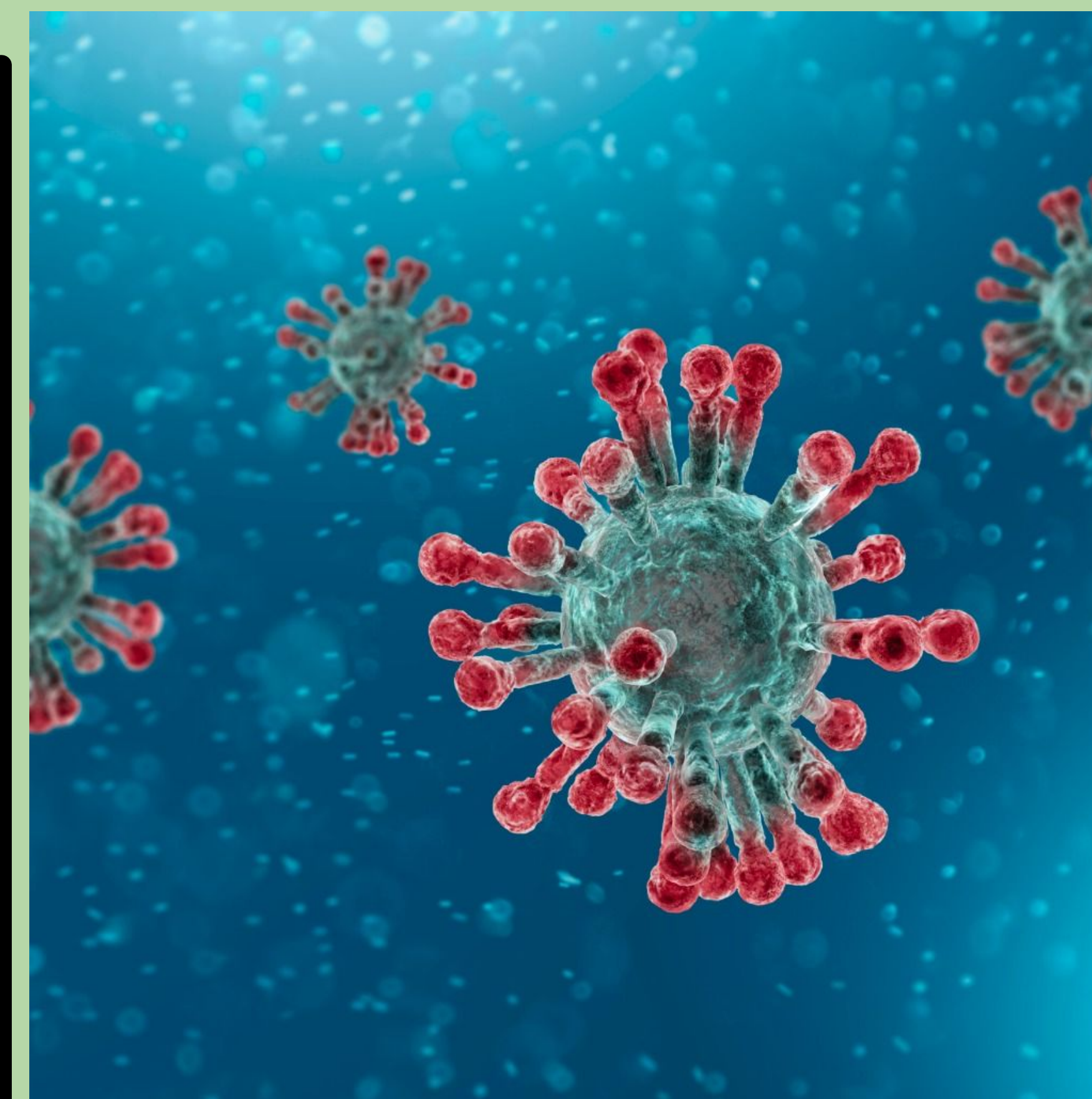


Rajneeshee, 1984: Prior bioterrorist events demonstrate the qualities that make it such a menacing problem in contemporary society. The Rajneeshee atypical spread of salmonella not only imposed illness upon hundreds of people, but disturbed local elections, sparked public distress, and financially destroyed several restaurants. Moreover, restaurants were initially blamed for the poisonings; law enforcement misidentified the origins of the salmonella as the result of mishandling food. It was not until the following year that the Rajneeshee were investigated and identified as the culprits and people realized the outbreak was not naturally-occurring. Strategies to contaminate the salad — merely pouring the substance into bars with a plastic bag — underline how easy it is to carry out such an impactful attack.

Aum Shinrikyo, 1995: The Aum Shinrikyo orchestrated sarin gas attacks on Tokyo subway lines. Infecting roughly 5,500 citizens and causing 13 fatalities, these sophisticated attacks showcase the stealthy nature of bioterrorism and its rapid spread among subway trains and stations. Attempts at neutralizing the outbreak were poor; subway authorities did not immediately halt trains, hospitals were unfamiliar with sarin poisoning, and media companies who documented the attacks were hesitant to help transport the infected to seek medical care. The way in which the attacks were carried out — via simple plastic bags containing the gas — also highlights the minimal equipment necessary to perform such a deadly event.

Amerithrax, 2001: The Amerithrax attacks became one of the most significant bioterrorist attacks of them all. Letters contaminated with anthrax were delivered to various news agency employees and legislative officials, infecting 17 individuals and killing five. Immediately following the news of the attack was widespread chaos across the country, with citizens horrified to go outside, open their mail, and the implementation of masks and gloves in postal services. The response to Amerithrax was inefficient as well; in fact, no suspect was identified until seven years later, when potential culprit Bruce Ivins was investigated but committed suicide before any arrest was made.

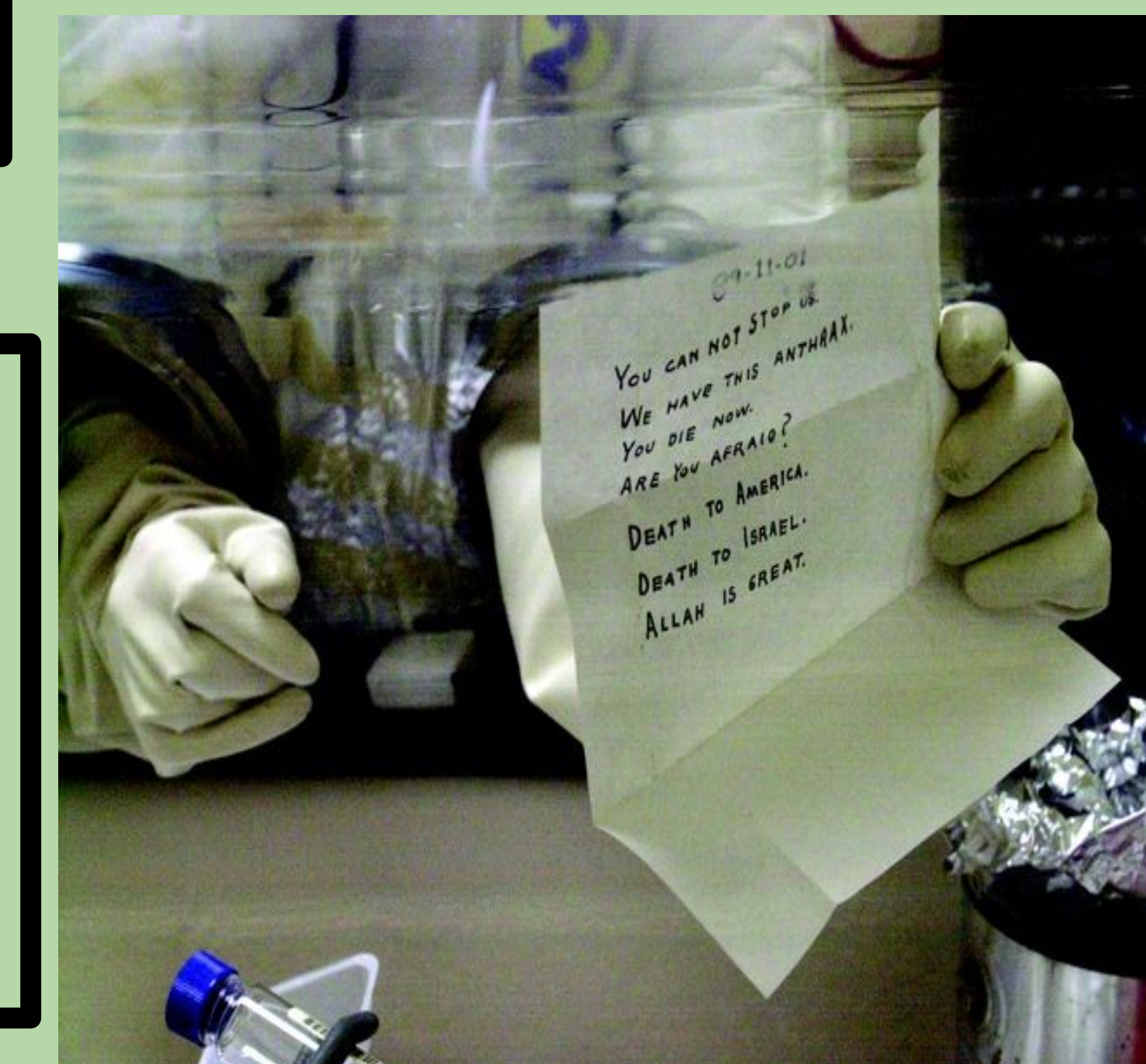
Developing Microbiology: Developing microbiological technology has the potential to take the place of simple bioterrorist techniques. Advancement in genetic engineering permits further manipulation of pathogens that can strengthen their infectivity, medicinal resistance, and lethality. As these technological progressions ensue, more people gain access to these techniques and thus more people become capable of bioterrorism.



Purpose & Rationale



The extremely hazardous nature of bioterrorism is an issue that must be more appropriately addressed in order to minimize its devastating impacts on populations. Prior bioterrorist events have shown to be severely dangerous and the responses to such events severely underperforming. Their complex characteristics combined with their simple deliverance create a threat that is indeed difficult to address, which is why more attention must be drawn to the phenomenon. Additionally, these simple tactics utilized to perform such events can become more sophisticated with the enhancement of microbiology, which has potential to only make attacks more intricate, thus more challenging to handle. This piece aims not to fearmonger, nor to create distrust toward governments; instead, its goal is to raise awareness of the momentous peril of bioterrorism and to potentially spark action in greater preparation for such events.



Methodology



Analysis of local news reports, legal documents, factual data from organizations such as the CDC and WHO, and other scholarly literature was applied to underscore the disastrous effects of bioterrorism, the underdeveloped strategies used to address such significant issues, and the simple yet potentially complex nature of systems utilized to carry out attacks.

Conclusions



The three target characteristics of this research — bioterrorism's hazardous effects on society, the failure to handle these hazards, and the strategies used to perform the terror — showcase its potential to greatly harm populations. It is indeed a modern threat that requires more attention in order to lessen the possibility of devastating any group it victimizes.

References

