

Scary scenarios

by [Larry Hedrick](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

GERMS: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War. By Judith Miller, Stephen Engelberg and William Broad. Simon & Shuster, 367 pp., \$27.00.

Though *GERMS* has been available in bookstores for only a few weeks, the current biowar being waged against the U.S. has already made it the unacknowledged source for more newspaper articles than any other book in recent history. Its observations have been parroted everywhere. The scientists and doctors who are quoted in the book have been transformed overnight into nationally recognized op-ed columnists and interviewees. Judith Miller has become a fixture on television shows. Consequently, in a sense we are all "reading" this book day by day, whether or not we ever hold it in our hands.

Humanity's heedless relationship with bioweaponry goes back to the period between the two world wars. The authors, *New York Times* reporters with special expertise in the Mideast, national security and general science, list 20th-century "Canada, France, Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom" as among the first countries to research the possibility of biological warfare. "All understood that the weapons they were developing were fundamentally different from bombs and bullets, grenades and missiles. . . . These munitions were alive. They could multiply exponentially and, if highly contagious, spread like wildfire. Strangest of all, given war's din, they worked silently."

As Miller, Stephen Engelberg and William Broad emphasize, after World War II the planet descended into new and dangerous depths because so many governments--including our own, but especially that of the Soviet Union--became convinced that preparing for biowarfare was one of the royal roads to national security. As a result, today's world population seems far more likely to crash as a result of the intentional release of biological agents than of any other type of weaponry.

Describing the situation in the U.S. at the end of the Reagan era, the authors write that "public health and microbiology had become backwaters, and the billions of federal dollars spent on biology tended to go into research aimed at cancer and the

illnesses of old age, such as heart disease. Public health was messy and old-fashioned. It had a weak constituency and little presence on the public agenda. Trillions of dollars were spent on weapons. For lack of a tiny fraction of that amount, millions of children throughout the world died of infectious diseases each year."

A public health system is meant to provide adequate health services to the poor, but it is also meant to fight massive health threats to the wider public. There is no more dramatic instance in which helping the disadvantaged provides practical advantages for all the people. Unfortunately, our narrowed vision and material success has made this a truth exceedingly difficult for most people to comprehend.

The Clinton administration began the task of constructing credible biodefenses, but his program fell far short of providing the nation with adequate supplies of medicines and vaccines against the threats now confronting us. As Miller has recently been telling her media audiences, it will take several more years to make these defenses adequate. If Miller, Engelberg and Broad's gloomier pronouncements are accurate, we will remain under the psychological threat of worst-case scenarios for a long time--perhaps for the rest of our lives.