

Anthrax Scares Intensify The 'Irregular War'

by Marcia Merry Baker and Carl Osgood

As more cases of infection and exposure are confirmed from the anthrax attacks, what was knowable right from the very first instance of the lethal anthrax letter in Florida, is clear: We are witnessing an intensification of *irregular warfare* already under way against the nation. Besides the acts of terrorism, there are the media hype, "psy-ops," and institutional crises that add up to classic irregular warfare methods of subverting a population into a state of desperate fear. Congress is dislocated; the House of Representatives recessed from Oct. 17-23, for their facilities to be cleared; the Senate planned a three-day weekend too. Major broadcast media have been hit, including NBS, CBS, ABC, and the tabloid publisher American Media Group, Inc.

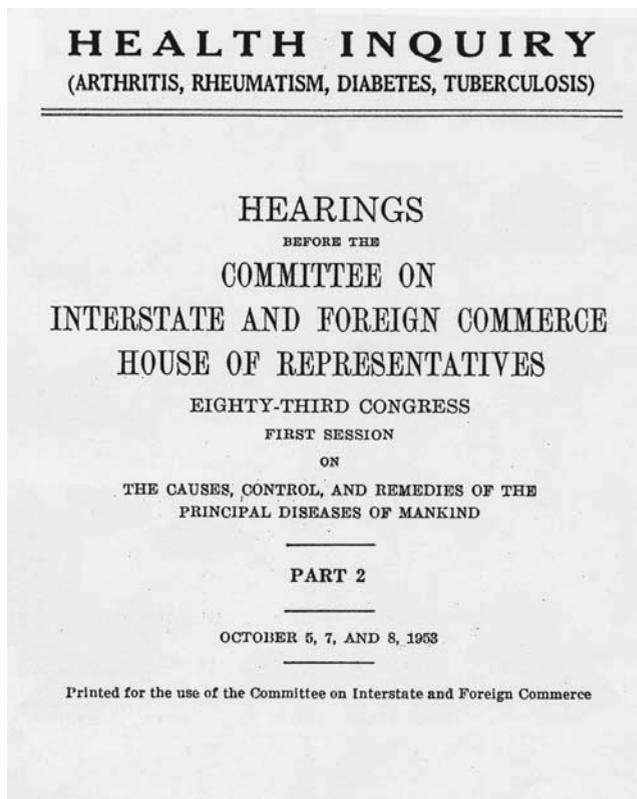
What is required in the matter of anthrax specifically, or any other "weaponized" disease threat, is enabling the public to calmly understand the medical science involved (the epidemiology, testing, treatment). They should understand, as well, how the U.S. public health system and medical research were allowed to languish over the last several decades of "market-based" social services.

Alibek: Think About The Science

Dr. Kenneth Alibek, the former First Deputy Chief of the civilian branch of the former Soviet Union's offensive biological weapons program in the 1980s, stressed to the Oct. 18 *Wall Street Journal* that causing illness was only the fifth-ranked goal of the Soviet bio-weapons program. First, was inciting panic and fear; then, paralyzing the nation; overwhelming medical services; and causing severe economic damage.

On Oct. 16, Alibek gave a briefing on Capitol Hill on the "science" involved in the anthrax threat. He observed how the United States has lost the commitment it had in the 1950s and '60s to analyze and fight infectious diseases. The graphic illustrates his point. It shows a page of the *Congressional Record* from the 83rd Congress (1954), when the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce held a series of hearings on "The Causes, Control, and Remedies of the Principal Diseases of Mankind."

"There's no reason to panic," was the message to the Congressional staffers from Alibek. His Oct. 16 briefing was sponsored by the Congressional Bipartisan Task Force on Nonproliferation, co-chaired by Reps. Chris Shays (R-Conn.) and Ed Markey (D-Mass.). Alibek, who came to the United



States in 1992 and is now a consultant for bio-defense programs under contract to the U.S. government, emphasized that while there are reasons why anthrax has sparked interest as a weapon, it should also not be overestimated as a threat.

Its potential as a weapon, comes from the fact that it's highly stable, able to survive for years in the soil, and the longer it takes to identify it in an infected person, the lower that person's chances of survival. Anthrax also is a complex infection with two or three stages of development, depending on the virulence factors of the strain involved.

However, once the nature of the threat is identified, it's very easy to defend against. It takes 8,000 to 50,000 spores—again, depending on the strain—in its inhalational form, to actually cause an infection. Alibek said the moisture and heat of a steam iron is sufficient to kill anthrax spores like the form involved in the recent incidents. He also described how gamma radiation (such as used in food irradiation) can be used to screen and sanitize large volumes of mail.

Dr. Alibek described, in some detail, how analysis of the powder in the recent anthrax incidents, can be used to identify the level of sophistication of those who are responsible for these incidents. Results of analysis can show such factors as other ingredients in the powder that may enhance its virulence; the stage of development of the spores; the size and form of the particles; and so forth. He said that if there are specific substances in the powder, then its source can be identified.