

## Laxity at the lab where 'Mr. Z' worked

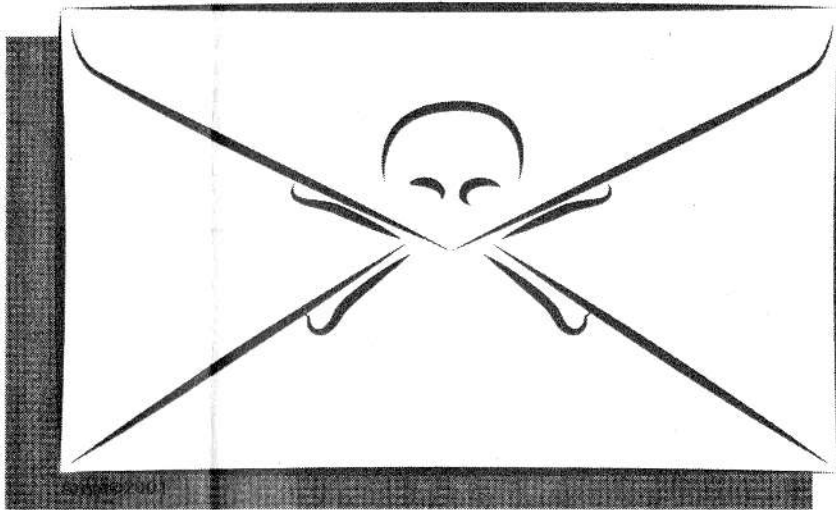
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It's bad enough that we can't find anthrax hidden in the Iraqi desert. But it turns out that we also misplaced anthrax and Ebola kept in a lab outside Washington.

Internal Army documents about the U.S. biodefense program describe missing Ebola and other pathogens, vicious feuds, lax security, cover-ups and a "cow-boy culture" beyond anyone's scrutiny. Moreover, germ warriors in the CIA and the Defense Department decided — without bothering to consult the White House — to produce anthrax secretly and tinker with it in ways that arguably put the U.S. in violation of the Biological Weapons Convention. It's time for Congress or an outside commission to investigate our nation's biodefense program and establish oversight.

"Shenanigans have been going on," declares one internal Army memo about the labs at ground zero of the biodefense world: Usamriid, the acronym for the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, based at Fort Detrick, Md.

The 400 pages of documents, which I've obtained and which were described by The Hartford Courant earlier this year, quote a newly arrived officer named Michael Langford as saying in about 1992 that he found "little or no organization," "little or no accountability," "a very lax and unorganized system" and signs of covert work and cover-ups.



Langford requested an inventory of pathogens acquired in 1991. The resulting memo shows that 62 samples had vanished, including Ebola, hantavirus, anthrax, SIV (the monkey version of the virus that causes AIDS), and several described only as "unknown."

Usamriid says that it rechecked this year and was able to account for virtually all of the missing specimens except one set that would have been irradiated to render it harmless. But a decade's delay in bothering to look for missing Ebola seems a bit much, and conversations with scientists who have worked at Usamriid do not inspire confidence (although, in fairness, many who talk publicly have lawsuits pending against the lab).

"When I was laid off, I walked out for

three days in a row with boxes, and no one looked inside them," recalled Richard Crosland, who worked at Usamriid from 1986 to 1997. "I was there for 11 years, and never once did anyone ask, 'Where is the substance you ordered?'"

"I could have walked out with it when I left, and no one would have known. I didn't, but I could have. 7-Eleven had better inventory control. And I was working with botulinum, which is one of the deadliest substances on earth.

"If you couldn't find a microscope, you were in real trouble. But if you misplaced five micrograms of botulinum that could kill thousands of people, nobody would notice."

In truth, many microbiology labs are pretty chaotic, and ultimately labs have

to pick reliable people and then trust them. But that's what piqued my interest in Usamriid in the first place — my research about a man I've called "Z," who has been interviewed four times by the FBI and whose home has been searched twice in connection with the anthrax investigation. Usamriid hired Z in 1997 to work with Ebola and Marburg viruses, although he had spent years in the armed forces of Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. When Z left Usamriid in 1999, he was making \$58,000 a year — and jumped to a \$150,000-a-year job with a private contractor.

Many bio-defense scientists risk their lives working with deadly germs to improve vaccines for American troops, and they deserve our gratitude. Still, the Army documents indisputably point out serious problems. They recount incidents in 1992 when someone appeared to be working secretly with anthrax at night and on weekends and then trying to cover it up. Memos describe how someone tried to roll back a numerical counter on an electron microscope to hide his work with anthrax.

As recently as April of this year, anthrax spores were found in a hallway and administrative area of Usamriid — shortly after Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., visited the complex. Anthrax spores seem to have it in for Democratic senators.

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