AUTHENTICATED
U.S. GOVERNMENT
INFORMATION
GPO

Interview With Judith Miller and William J. Broad of the New York Times

January 21, 1999

Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons

The President. Before you ask questions, I just want to say that I really have appreciated the stories you've done, because I think it's so important that—it's sort of a balance thing, but I want to raise public awareness of this and awareness also with people with influence who can influence decision-making without throwing people into an unnecessary panic. And I think these stories have been exceedingly valuable.

Sandy was making fun of me today before you came in. Sandy Berger was—he said, when you started talking about this 6 years ago nobody around here—people just didn't—they hadn't thought about it.

Q. Six years ago.

The President. I've been asking them to think about this for a long, long time. And of course, we had it more or less in the context of terrorism because we had the World Trade Center and all the other things to worry about. But anyway.

Q. But actually, one of my first questions—because we've heard so many rumors about how you got interested and none of what has happened would have happened without your interest. But what was it?

The President. Well, it was—first of all, I spend a lot of time thinking about 5 years from now, 10 years from now, 15 years from now. I think that's one of the things that Presidents are supposed to do and especially when things are changing so much. But we had—keep in mind, we had the World Trade Center issue; we had the CIA killer; and then later you had the incident in the Tokyo subway and then Oklahoma City. We've had a lot of terrorist incidents, culminating in the bombing of our Embassies in Africa and what happened in Khobar, other things.

One of the things that I have worried about from the beginning with the breakdown of the Soviet Union before my time here was how to help them deal with the aftermath of the massive nuclear system they have, and starting with the Nunn-Lugar funds, going all the way up to our threat reduction proposals in this year's budget, you know, we tried to hire—keep the scientists and the labs working and do joint projects of all kinds that would be constructive.

But it was pretty obvious to me that, given the size of the Soviet biological and chemical programs and the fact that we know a lot of other nations are trying to develop chemical capacity and some biological capacity, that we had not only nuclear problems, but we have a chemical and biological problem. And of course, the Vice President and others sort of sensitized me to this whole computer problem. We had the incident with the defense computers just a few months ago. But before that, I kept reading about all these non—in the line of national security, all these computer hackers. You know, I'm technologically challenged. I can do E-mail and a few other things, you know. But it struck me that we were going to have to find some way to try to deal with that, too, because of the defense implications, as well as the other possibilities.

And I've had all kinds of—I also find that reading novels, futuristic novels—sometimes people with an imagination are not wrong—Preston's novel about biological warfare, which is very much based on——

Q. ''Hot Zone'' or ''Cobra Event''? Which one impressed you?

The President. ''The Cobra Event.''

Q. That's the one.

The President. Well, ''The Hot Zone'' was interesting to me because of the Ebola thing, because that was a fact book. But I thought

"The Cobra Event" was interesting, especially when he said what his sources were, which seemed fairly credible to me. And then I read another book about a group of terrorists shutting down the telephone networks in the Northeast and the Midwest.

Q. What was that? Do you remember?

The President. I can't remember. I read so many things. I can't remember. A couple years ago. But anyway, when I—and a lot of times it's just for thrills, but a lot of times these people are not far off. You know, they sell books by imagining the future, and sometimes they're right; sometimes they're wrong.

So I've gotten—I don't want to sound—I've gotten a lot of sort of solid, scientific input. I've also solicited opinions from people working on the genome project, for example, and about what the implications of that might be for dealing with biological warfare. And last year, we had a whole group of experts come in here and spend an extended amount of time with me and then follow up with the staff on biological issues in particular. So I've had a real interest in this, and I think we're about to get up to speed.

But we just have to be prepared for it. I mean, it's—if you look back through all of human history, people who are interested in gaining control or influence or advantage over others have brought to bear the force of arms. And what normally happens from the beginning of history is the arms work until a defense is erected, and then there's an equilibrium until there is a new offensive system developed, and then a defense comes up, going all the way back to—well, even before it, but castle moats which were overcome by catapults.

And so, basically, I think what has concerned me is that we, because we're moving from one big issue—will there be a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, to now a whole lot of proliferation of issues, dealing with smaller scale nuclear issues, chemical and biological issues, missile technology and, of course, the related computer cyber-crime issue—is that I just don't want the lag time between offense and defense to be any longer than is absolutely necessary.

That, I think, is the challenge for us, is to try to—before anything really tragic happens not only in the United States but anywhere else. We've had enough warning signs out there now, enough concrete evidence, and we need to close the door of the gap between the offense and defense.

Gravity and Timing of the Threat

Q. How worried should we be, and how—we don't want to panic people. And research has seen some of these warning signs, and readers call, and they want to know, is this—how worried should we be? Is this serious today, and is the threat rising? Is it going be more serious in the future?

The President. I would say that if the issue is, how probable is it in the very near-term an American city or community would be affected, I'd say you probably shouldn't be too worried. But if the issue is, is it a near certainty that at some time in the future there will be some group, probably a terrorist group, that attempts to bring to bear either the use or the threat of a chemical or biological operation, I would say that is highly likely to happen sometime in the next few years. And therefore, I would say the appropriate response is not worry or panic but taking this issue very seriously, expecting all elected officials with any responsibility in this area to know everything they can, and to do everything we can both to erect all possible defenses and then to try to make sure we are doing everything we can to stop this.

Now, we know right now—we know that a lot of what we've done already has delayed WMD programs, some of which I can't talk about, but slowed the development of WMD programs of missile technology development that might deliver such weapons and other things. And we're doing everything we can to stop or slow down the ability of others, insofar as we know about it and can do something about it. And meanwhile, we're doing everything we can both to develop defenses and emergency responses. But I think we've got an enormous amount of work out there ahead of us, an enormous amount of work.

And a lot of this has to be done with great cooperation between the Federal Government—we need cooperation of the private sector on the cyber issues, the computer

issues. We need cooperation with local government on public health response issues, exposure—if there appears to be an outbreak. We had all these sort of false alarms of anthrax in California—how many?—more than a dozen, I think, in the last month. So we need to be able to diagnose and to treat and also to manage those things.

Biological Threat and Developing a Response

Q. Does one of these threats worry you more than another, and does any one in particular keep you awake at night?

The President. Well, I have spent some late nights thinking a lot about this and reading a lot about it. I think in terms of offense versus defense, if you go back to where we started, the thing that I'm most interested in—and you will see we've allocated several hundred million dollars basically to research and to applied research—the thing that I'm most interested in is developing the ability to quickly contain biological agents.

A chemical attack would be horrible, but it would be finite. You know, it's just like—for the people who went through Oklahoma City, nothing could be more horrible. But it didn't spread. The thing that bothers people about biological agents is that, unless they're properly diagnosed, contained, and treated, that it could spread.

For example, we know that if all of us went to a rally on The Mall tomorrow with 10,000 people, and somebody flew a low-flying crop duster and sprayed us all with biological agents from, let's say 200 feet, that no matter how toxic it were, half of us would walk away for reasons no one quite understands. You know, either we wouldn't breathe it, or we'd have some miraculous resistance to it. And the other half of us, somebody would have to diagnose in a hurry and then contain and treat. Otherwise, it would be kind of like the gift that keeps on giving, you know. [*Laughter*]

And I don't mean that—I'm not trying to be macabre, but you asked me what keeps me awake at night, and that bothers me. And that's why the thing that I thought was most important about what we did last year, and what we learned a little bit from our defense scare—even though it was on a computer issue, we had this defense issue, plus we were dealing with all this—we'd studied for a year all this—especially this biological issue—is we had this work going on in 12 different places in the Government. So we had to organize our efforts, so that we could be accessible to local governments, so we could work with them, to set up their own preventive mechanisms.

And I have to tell you, it may be—we may have to await—it's a note I made to myself that we may have to have a perfect defense. I mean, instantaneous. We may have to depend upon the genome project, interestingly enough, because once the human genes' secrets are unlocked, then if you and I think we've been infected, they could take a blood sample, and there would be a computer program which would show us if we had, let's say, we had a variant of anthrax. Let's suppose some terrorist hired a genius scientist and a laboratory to take basic anthrax and put some variant in it that would be resistant to all known anthrax antidotes.

Q. Okay. Or a Russian scientist.

The President. Yes. So let's just suppose that happened. And what you would want is to be able to take a blood sample, do an analysis, put it through a software program that had already been developed, and say, "Okay, here is—this is how the genes are different. This is the difference." And then presumably, not too long after we've developed this, they will already know, well, therefore, this is how you should—how you should change the vaccine.

And we know now—I know this is kind of bewildering, but keep in mind this is actually good news because, if there were no genome project, if there were no rapid way to do quick analysis that would go right to the tiniest variant, we would be in trouble. And now these scientists are working on this, and we're actually a little bit ahead of the original predicted timetable on unlocking the secrets of the gene. And when that happens, one of the side benefits, I think, will be to be able to tell these things much more quickly.

But meanwhile, we've got this plan. We're stockpiling the vaccines, and we're doing all this research which the Government has to fund, because obviously there's no market for it, right? It's not like—there's no market for

it, and I hope there never will be any market for it. But we have to pay, the Government has to pay, for this research to develop new vaccines and to manage it along. And I think we will do—I think we've got a very good increase in the budget, and I really think it will have broad bipartisan support.

Human Genome Project

Q. There's a school of worrywarts out there that says this genome stuff is a double-edged sword, and at some point you can envision ethnic weapons, looking at racial differences and try to do selective——

Q. And targeting.

Q. Look at Kosovo. Look at how much of the blood that has spilled is just rooted in this ethnic——

The President. Yes, but I think to be fair, we're a good ways away from that. I think we need to worry far more about the fact that most of these groups—we know, for example—let's take something I can talk about because it's public record. We know Usama bin Ladin's network has made an effort to get chemical weapons.

Q. Biological or just chemical?

The President. Well, we know they've made an effort to get chemical weapons; they may have made an effort to get biological weapons. We do not know that they have them. It is true—if you take this thing out to sort of the science fiction conclusion, obviously the genome project itself carries the seeds of its own misuse. But right now I'm absolutely convinced that the advantages dwarf the disadvantages in this area.

Plus, which all the other advantages of it—I mean, it's going to lead us to—we will save countless lives because we'll know in advance what predisposition people have, what problems they have—the genome project would be the seminal event—you know, when it's done, of the first part of the 21st century, there's no doubt about that.

But to come back to your point, the only point I would make, whenever you ask me a question like that, I think it's best for you to remember the formulation that I started with, and it's interesting to think about the moat and the catapult, the spear and the shield—anything. It's all a question of people who have money, organization, and an interest, whether it's political or financial or religious or whatever in oppressing other people or holding them down will always be looking for new offensive weapons.

Our goal should always be, for the sake of the world as well as the security of the American people, to make sure not only that we can defend ourselves and counter-punch, if you will, but to develop with each new wave of technology to close the gap between offense and defense. And if we do that, I think that's the strategy that I hope will become at least an integral part of our national security strategy in the WMD area.

Anthrax Vaccination

Q. Mr. President, in the interim we have a lot of Americans, more than 2 million Americans in uniform, being vaccinated against anthrax. Are you vaccinated?

The President. The Secret Service told me I couldn't discuss that, and they have good reasons for not wanting me to do it. But let me say, I'm convinced that like any other vaccination, there may be some small rejection, but I think on balance it's a safe procedure. I've looked at the reports, and I think on balance, given the fact that we send so many of our men and women in uniform into places where they could be exposed, I think that they're better off being vaccinated. I do not believe that the threat in the United States is sufficient that I could recommend that to people, to the public at large.

Response to the Terrorist Threat

Q. What about first responders or people in hospitals who might be exposed to smallpox, anthrax, plague, and things like that?

The President. The real answer there is, we haven't reached a conclusion, but we're considering that. Because we have to work with the first responders, we've got the public health people looking into this and other people, and I think that that's a judgment that ought to be made primarily by people who are in the best position to make a professional judgment about it. So that's something that's being considered.

Q. We've heard about something else that's being considered that I think Bill wants to ask you about.

Q. As you may be aware, Secretary Cohen and people at the Pentagon are talking about trying to create a new position of commander-in-chief for the continental United States because of the terror threat. And it's moving through the system, and at some point it's going to come to you, probably sometime this summer. Are you inclined to create that kind of position for the military?

The President. Let me say, I think that we need to have an organized response, if you will, to what you might call "homeland defense" on CBW and cyber or computer terrorism issues. And now we've established a national coordinator on these issues in the White House. We've got this national domestic preparation office at the Justice Department. We've got a National Infrastructure Protection Center. We've got a joint task force on cyber defense already at DOD in response to what they went through before.

So I want them to look at where we are and make some recommendations to me. I'm not sure that that is what they're going to recommend, and I think that I shouldn't give an answer to the question you ask until I see what the range of options are and what the range of recommendations is.

Q. Do you have a leaning one way or another?

The President. No, just except to say that it is very important that we outline every single responsibility that we have as a nation at the national level and that someone be responsible for it. I want to know—as I said, one of the things that we learned last year that I think was a legitimate criticism of what we have done in our administration is that we had 12 different places where these activities were going on, and they weren't being properly coordinated and driven in the proper fashion. And we've tried to resolve this. And this is sort of the last big kind of organizational piece, as far as I know, that is yet to be resolved. So the military is going to make me a recommendation and I will respond accordingly.

Again, the American people, this shouldn't be a cause for alarm; this should be a cause for reassurance. They should want us to be well-organized on these things because—remember for years and years, when I was a boy we used to do all those—they had all these fallout shelters, and every school had its drills and all that. I mean, I'm older than you, so you wouldn't remember this, but——

Q. No, we did it.

The President. But you know, and we—it was a sensible thing to do under the circumstances. Thank God we never experienced it. But it was the sensible thing to do. And so what I want us to do is everything, within reason, we can to minimize our exposure and risks here, and that's how I'm going to evaluate this Pentagon recommendation.

Secretary Cohen, I think, is also real focused on this now. I've been very pleased with the priority he's given it. And I think that all these guys know that after their experience with the computer issue that all this—tomorrow's threats may be very different from yesterday's, and we've got to be ready.

Funding the Response

Q. What do you say to people, to skeptics who say all this is just Pentagon maneuvering, creating new bogeymen to scare us so they can whip up new budget authority? And it's—and that's a large crowd.

The President. Even though we're talking about hundreds of millions of dollars and in the aggregate a few billion dollars, it's nowhere near as expensive as maintaining this sort of basic infrastructure of defense, the case of public health, the basic infrastructure of public health.

I say to them, they should understand that we have intelligence—and a lot of it is in the public arena, you all write about it—about all the countries that are trying—the countries and the groups that want chemical weapons, that want biological weapons, that are trying to get agents, precursor agents that you can use to develop chemicals or basic agents you can use to develop biological weapons. And everybody knows now the world is full of hackers that seek to intrude on networks, that seek to insert bogus codes into programs and all this sort of stuff. And it would be completely irresponsible for us not to allocate a substantial investment in trying to protect America from threats that will be, in all probability, as likely or more likely in the future than the threats we think we face today.

That's why we started this conversation by saying, I don't want to say anything that will overly alarm anybody. I'm not trying to stir up a lot of false threats. But if you look at just what the UNSCOM people in Iraq—they say that they don't believe that the reporting in Iraq is consistent with what they believe the chemical capacity there is.

If you look at the fact with regard to chemicals, with the Chemical Weapons Conventions, if we can get it properly implemented, at least we will be able to track probably that plus intelligence, large volumes of chemical stocks. But with biological stocks, a very small laboratory with the right materials to work with, you could develop supplies that could kill a large number of people. It simply is irresponsible for us not to both do the best we can with public health protections, do the best research we can on vaccines, stockpile what we know works, and then get out there and try to build a defense and an ability to interrupt and stop with export controls and any other way we can these developments, and it costs money.

But to me, it's money well spent. And if there is never an incident, nobody would be happier than me 20 years from now if the same critics would be able to say, "Oh, see, Clinton was a kook; nothing happened." I would be the happiest man on Earth. I would be the happiest man on Earth. If they could say, "He overexaggerated it; nothing happened. All he did was make a bunch of jobs for scientists and build the Pentagon budget," I would be elated 20 years from now to be subject to that criticism because it would mean that nothing happened and in no small measure because of the efforts we've made.

Russia

Q. Since we have so little time left, Mr. President, Russia. How can you be sure—since they violated the treaty that they signed banning biological weapons for 20 years, does it make sense to work with them now on biological projects? Are you certain that they are not doing biological research? And what do you do?

The President. Let me say this. I think that the more we work with them and the more their scientists are working with us and the more successful we are in building a common endeavor, the more it will be in their interest to comply. The real danger in Russia, I think—dangers—are two. One is—I'll take one that is outside the CBW area so it doesn't look like I'm waving the red flag here—when we started the space station—you know, John Glenn went up and then we sent the first two components of the space station up—it had been months since a lot of those Russian scientists had been paid.

That's why it is very, very important, I think, to say we value this enormous infrastructure of scientific expertise they have in the space area, in the CBW area, and we want to work with them. This budget of mine would enable us to do joint work with 8,000 Russian scientists. Now, there are, I think, 40,000 total—we think. But that's important. That bothers me.

The second thing that concerns me is that when Russia shed communism, they adopted a strategy which was widely lauded at the time in the United States and elsewhere, but they were actually—when I went to Russia, and you remember right after my mother died I got on the plane, and I went to the Czech Republic and Russia—that was, what, January of '94. Actually at that time, the Czech Republic was doing very well and was sort of the poster child of the new economy in the former communist countries. But when I was there, Russia had actually privatized more property than the Czech Republic had.

And this relates partly to the economic crisis, but when they did it, they did it without having had the benefit of an effective central bank, a securities and exchange commission, all these other things. So that you had money coming in and money flying out now. And one of the problems they have now is that it's not a totalitarian Government anymore. There are a lot of private companies—all the private companies there by definition used to be part of the state, unless they're new businesses. And so one of the problems we're having is, even when they're trying to help us, is keeping up with what all these companies and their subsidiaries do.

And that's been the tension that you've written a lot about, and there's been a lot

in the press about was there missile cooperation with Iran or not, and does that violate our understanding, and does that call for some action vis-a-vis Russia? And part of the problem is, just keeping up with this proliferation of companies and people that used to have some connection to the Soviet State, some connection to the defense apparatus.

It's not a simple process, and it's not a perfect process, but I am absolutely convinced that this threat reduction initiative we've got can kind of intensify our efforts to work with them, as well as to really implement the Chemical Weapons Treaty, and get some teeth in the Biological Weapons Convention. That's very, very important. I think that is the best strategy. It may not be perfect, but it is better than the alternative.

Response to an Attack

Q. What do you do if the nightmare comes to pass, and some country hits us, hits us hard, with a biological weapon? What kind of response would you do?

The President. Well, first of all, if some country were thinking about doing that, I would certainly hope that they wouldn't have the capacity to do it before we could stop them or interrupt them, if it was a—that is, if you're talking about somebody lobbing a missile over here or something like that.

I think if it happened, it would be an act of war, and there would be a very strong response. But I think we've demonstrated that. But I think the far more likely thing is somebody representing some interest—maybe it could be a rogue state; maybe it could be a terrorist network—walking around a city with a briefcase full of vials or in spray cans, you know.

So what we have to do—any country with any sense, if they wanted to attack us, would try to do it through a terrorist network, because if they did it with a missile we'd know who did it, and then they'd be sunk. It would be—that's a deal where they're bound to lose. Big time.

Q. Would you respond with nuclear weapons to a biological attack?

The President. Well, I never discuss the nuclear issue. I don't think that's appropriate. But I think that we would have at least a proportionate, if not a disproportionate, response if someone committed an act of war against the United States. That's what we would do. And if somebody willfully murdered a lot of our civilians, there would be a very heavy price to pay.

Senator Dale Bumpers' Senate Impeachment Trial Presentation

Q. Mr. President, you have time for one more——

Q. We're about to go. Did you have a chance to watch any of Senator Bumpers' presentation today?

The President. I did. It's the only thing I've watched. I watched that.

Q. He said—he criticized the House managers for lacking compassion for your family. He described your family as a family that has been "about as decimated as a family can get. The relationship between husband and wife, father and child, has been incredibly strained if not destroyed." Is that an accurate representation?

The President. Well, it's been—I would say it has been a strain for my family. But we have worked very hard, and I think we have come through the worst. We love each other very much, and we've worked on it very hard. But I think he was showing—you know, he knows me and Hillary and Chelsea, and we've all been friends, as he said, for 25 years. I think he was just trying to inject a human element into what he was saying.

NOTE: The interview began at approximately 6:30 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House on January 21 and was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 23. In his remarks, the President referred to Usama bin Ladin, who allegedly sponsored bombing attacks on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania on August 7, 1998. He also referred to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and chemical and biological weapons (CBW). A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

The President's Radio Address

January 23, 1999

Good morning. Last Tuesday night, in my State of the Union Address, I was honored to report to the American people that our families, our communities, and our country are stronger, healthier, and more prosperous