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2001 anthrax attacks were the catalyst for today's COVID defenses

BY DAVID MALET, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 10/07/21 2:04 PM ET

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Twenty years ago this month, a mentally-ill American scientist unleashed a wave of terror on his own country by mailing a series of letters tainted by spores of the deadly anthrax bacteria to targets including the offices of two United States

Although I was a survivor of those attacks, in 2001 it seemed obvious that the 9/11 attacks had a much bigger impact on America and the rest of the world. But in 2021, it is Amerithrax that is continuing to affect all of our daily lives. That is because the bioterrorist attack jump-started investment in biosecurity research, and ultimately in responses to pandemics, that has given us social distancing strategies and the availability of COVID-19 vaccines mere months after the virus was identified. We would have been less prepared for the pandemic and potentially lost many more lives if not for lessons from Amerithrax.

The anthrax attacks were dubbed Amerithrax by the FBI because the anthrax (*Bacillus anthracis*) spores had a domestic source despite the pro-Jihad letters that accompanied them. During October and November 2001, five Americans in locations as far apart as Connecticut and Florida died and another 17 became ill because of exposure to contaminated mail. The letter sent to the office of Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), where I worked, caused the closure of the Hart Senate Office Building for more than three months.

Nearly seven years after the attacks, new genetic-analysis technology identified the Amerithrax spores as a laboratory sample used exclusively by Dr. Bruce Ivins, head of the U.S. Army's anthrax defense research program. The FBI speculated that Ivins was trying to exploit the 9/11 attacks to gain funding for his own research. Ivins committed suicide before trial, leaving behind many questions.

In terms of both reputational damage and legal settlement, Amerithrax seemingly undermined the Cold War legacy biological weapons defense program. Still, bioterrorism was clearly a real threat. President George W. Bush made biodefense a main component of early homeland security initiatives, including spending \$5.6 billion in the Project BioShield Act of 2004, to develop countermeasures to unconventional health threats.

In 2002, the White House insisted that all military personnel, postal workers and first responders have access to an anthrax vaccine even though it had not been approved by the FDA. Like our COVID-19 vaccinations today, the information and misinformation about the vaccine had caused controversy for years; servicemen

By 2005, after reading a book about the 1918 influenza pandemic and with fresh experience with the SARS-1 coronavirus and other outbreaks, Bush ordered the federal government to prepare for the next pandemic. One result was that, after intense internal debate, the United States built [social distancing](#) into its epidemic mitigation strategies.

New outbreaks, such as the 2009 [H1N1 swine flu pandemic](#), led to expanding the use of EUAs to treat the public. By the 10 anniversary of Amerithrax, research programs to rapidly create [genetically-engineered vaccines](#) for each new outbreak were in place. In 2011, the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) [was developing](#) the first RNA-based vaccines — precursors of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines that hundreds of millions of Americans received in 2021.

[In 2017](#), DARPA set the project goal of being able to develop antibodies for any virus within 60 days of obtaining a blood sample. Researchers fell just short of this once-unthinkable goal with COVID-19. But that research helped the pharmaceutical industry create COVID antibodies [within weeks](#) of obtaining the first samples.

As a survivor of Amerithrax, I have complicated feelings about the 20th anniversary of the attacks, and I have come to terms with the fact that most Americans consider them to be just a historical footnote. But one thing that is clear to me this year is that the measures that have protected millions of people during the pandemic grew directly out of America's experience with bioterrorism 20 years ago.

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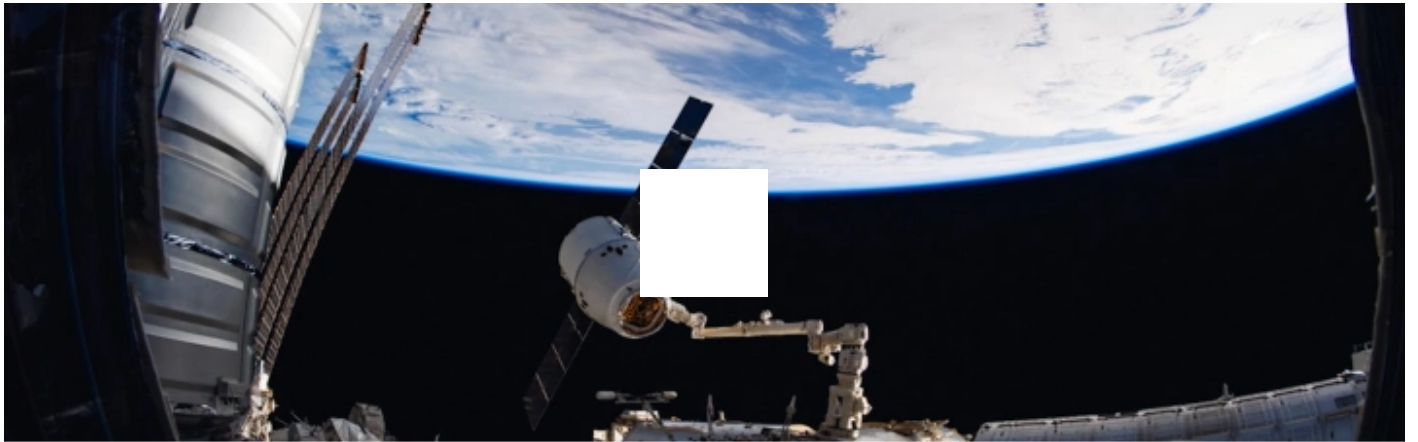
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