



## The Threat of Bioterrorism and Pandemics Since 9/11: How to Improve North American Cooperation

**April 2, 2007: WORKSHOP ON BIODEFENSE IN NORTH AMERICA**

On Monday 2 April CNAS sponsored a workshop on biosecurity and pandemic response within the North American community. This event brought together some of the world's most prominent experts on these subjects who explored various aspects of this important subject.

Chair: **Dr. Robert A. Pastor**, Director of the Center for North American Studies and Vice President International Affairs, American University.

Organizer/Moderator: **Dr. Donald Avery**, Fulbright Visiting Chair in North American Studies.

### Keynote Speaker

**Dr. Matthew Meselson**

Thomas Dudley Cabot Professor of Natural Sciences, and Director of the Harvard Sussex Program in Chemical and Biological Weapons Limitation, Belfer Center, Harvard University.

### Panel of Experts

**Dr. Randolph Murch**, Associate Director for Research Program Development, Virginia Tech University and formerly FBI forensics expert for biological weapons

**Dr. David Franz**, Vice-President & Chief Biological Scientist, Midwest Research Institute and former commander USAMRIID

**Dr. Jeanne Guillemin**, Senior Fellow, MIT Security Studies Program, Center for International Studies and author of Biological Weapons: From Invention of State Sponsored Programs to Contemporary Bioterrorism (2005)

**Mr. Michael Thielmann**, Senior Liaison Director, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (Seconded to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security)

## Summary

The workshop was fortunate in having Dr Meselson as its keynote speaker. His impressive credentials, both as an internationally renowned scientist, and as one of the world's leading advocates for biological and chemical arms control, make him a much sought after expert. His lecture addressed a number of complex issues associated with biological weapons, past and present. Most important was Meselson's assertion that bioterrorism was neither a major nor imminent threat, noting that there had not been any 'copy-cat' BW attacks since the anthrax contaminated letters of 2001. On the other hand, he pointed out that effective national and international oversight of BW research remained inadequate, and that government sponsored research on the use of biological and chemical incapacitants presented some disturbing trends.

The scientific dimensions of the keynote address were analyzed by Murch and Franz, while the political and international aspects were explored by Guillemin and Thielmann. Throughout the discussion there were a number of references to the sense of American 'exceptionalism' in developing its biosecurity programs. Alternatively, there were suggestions that greater US cooperation should take place with other governments, notably Canada and Mexico, under the Security and Prosperity Partnership.

Other important themes included the value of effective BW forensics investigation at both the national and international level; the role of scientific oversight organizations in preventing 'dangerous' dual use biotechnology research; problems of interoperability between national biosecurity partners, notably law enforcement and public health officials; greater interaction between threat and risk assessments of biodefense vulnerabilities; and why excessive government secrecy and the 'culture of fear' were serious obstacles in developing an effective United States dialogue on the present and future threat of bioterrorism.