



Insight

Bio-Shield

JULY 23, 2010

In 2004, in the wake of anthrax attacks in New York and in Washington, the Congress passed and the president signed into law legislation that was purported to protect the American people from a biological attack. The law created a special reserve fund dedicated to developing medical “countermeasures” to treat symptoms that came from any biological, chemical, radiological or nuclear weapons that might be used by our enemies.

Now, many libertarians might harrumph that the government shouldn’t take such an active role in the biological marketplace, but the fact of the matter is that the risk of a biological attack is fairly low, so the marketplace can’t really support such medical countermeasures without government support. Also, one of the purposes of government as defined in our Constitution is to provide for the common defense, and well, this fits the bill.

The Bio-Shield Act authorized that about 5 and a half billion dollars be spent between 2004 and 2013, and since that time about 2.3 billion dollars have actually been spent.

The program has worked as planned. Over the last six years, procurement contracts have been reached to find vaccines for anthrax, smallpox, botulinum and others. Thankfully, we haven’t had to use the program for any emergencies thus far, but then again, I have fire insurance, and I haven’t had to use that, either.

Fast-forward to 2010, where we now have a president who is facing intense pressure to reduce spending and a liberal Congress that is trying to find ways to spend more money. Both sides seem to have settled on scuttling our Bio-Defense Fund.

According to the Los Angeles Times: “At issue is a House budget bill that would cut up to \$2 billion from the Project BioShield special reserve fund to buy drugs and vaccines in the event of a biological attack. The funds were set aside as a guarantee to private companies that if they produced the medicines, government money would be available to buy them. ... The White House has not objected to the cut and has criticized the fund. Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, issued a statement Thursday protesting the reduction, along with two Republicans, Richard M. Burr of North Carolina and Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, who wrote the law that created the fund in 2004. The statement included a letter signed by seven more Democrats and six more Republicans. ‘The catastrophic events of Sept. 11 and the anthrax attacks that followed demonstrated that our government was ill prepared to deal with the kinds of terrorist attacks we may well face in the future,’ Lieberman said. ‘We still have no modern vaccine for anthrax and no countermeasures for dozens of other potential bioterror pathogens. The BioShield Program was meant to address these serious security shortcomings.’ Siphoning the funds to other programs, as the House bill would do, ‘would be frightfully shortsighted and would jeopardize the security of the American people against a very real and potent threat,’ he said.”

It seems that the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee wants to cut this program to spend money on other things, not to strike a blow against the deficit (no surprise there). Chief among those wish-list items is more money for the teachers unions.

But cutting this program is kind of like getting rid of fire insurance. It might seem like a good idea — until a fire destroys your house.

Bob Graham, whom President Obama just appointed to investigate the Gulf oil spill, and Jim Talent, his former co-chairman on the Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism, said this about the proposed rescission: “We are deeply concerned to learn that the BioShield Strategic Reserve Fund (SRF) is once again under attack. The proposal, which has passed in the House and is now headed to the Senate for action, would divert funds from the SRF to non-national security programs. While there are many important elements in a comprehensive biodefense program, none are more important than the development, production and acquisition of medical countermeasures.”

I share their concern. We might not have to ever use the vaccines and other medical “countermeasures” that are being created by the Bio-Shield, but what if we do have to use them and we don’t have them?

Seems pretty risky to me.

This article originally appeared in [The Hill](#) on July 23, 2010