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The Deadly Fools Of Plum Island

From Patricia Doyle, PhD

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Jeff - I have seen some articles lately referring to the Plum as a BSL 4 laboratory. It appears that Homeland "lack of" Security has been able to sneak in the BSL 4 upgrade. So, the Plum is a BSL4/BSL5. It has now been compared to the Ft. Detrick lab.

What fools! Didn't anyone hear me or Mike Carroll or any of the reporters who had been to the devil's own island and saw the steel drums above ground in the dump oozing their infected contents??

It almost makes me want to give up and simply hang the sign "gone fishing." Problem is...the Long Island sound fishing isn't so good anymore, and there are no more lobsters. If I went fishing, I would probably simply fish out test tubes or Plum Island refuse.

It is a monster island where animals check in but don't check out...

Patty

"Monster Island"

New York's Plum Island is a level-4 bioresearch facility.

What exactly is going on there?

By Alan Cabal

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I make it a rule to never ascribe malicious intent to any occurrence that can be reasonably attributed to human stupidity. There is no such thing as a completely fail-safe system; at least, none that human ingenuity can devise. Likewise, I acknowledge the role of coincidence in the course of human events. Synchronicity does not necessarily imply a designing will. Shit happens, as they say.

The tragic loss of the space shuttle Columbia is a classic illustration of both of these principles: The shuttle is as close to a fail-safe system as our species is capable of. No one at NASA wants to lose an astronaut to an accident. The fact that it broke up over Palestine, TX, while carrying an Israeli war hero is simply a coincidence. It was not brought down by a stone-throwing child, an errant kite or a suicide bomber. There are those who see the Hand of God in coincidences such as this. I am not one of those people.

That said, I do tend to agree with the ancient Greeks that hubris leads inevitably to a correction of some sort. As hubris has become as ubiquitous as obesity in America lately, I try not to concern myself too much with it. Inasmuch as I can, I keep my concerns local.

And locally, there is no more terrifying example of hubris than the Plum Island Animal Disease Research Center.

Located just two miles off the tip of Long Island and six miles from the Connecticut coastline, Plum Island is home to a Bio-Safety Level 4 (BSL-4) research facility. The only comparable government facilities in the country are the United States Army laboratory at Fort Detrick, MD, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Plum Island is specifically engaged in the study of

zoonotic diseases. Zoonotic diseases are diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans, like West Nile, like Lyme disease. Like Ebola.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture established the research facility there after acquiring the 840-acre island from the military at the end of World War II. The initial charter from Congress mandated the study of animal diseases, particularly foot-and-mouth disease, with an eye toward eradicating these maladies from the nation's livestock. It seemed an ideal location for such an endeavor: prevailing winds, after all, blow out to sea.

In 1954, the research took a more aggressive turn, with scientists looking to cook up ways to inflict damage on Soviet livestock. The Cuban government alleges that in the 1960s and 70s, bioweapons developed at Plum were deployed against Cuban agriculture, targeting pork, tobacco and sugar cane. Back in 1999, Floyd P. Horn, administrator of the Agriculture Research Service, persuaded President Clinton to include Plum Island in his expanded bioterrorism program based on the possibility of a biological attack on the nation's agricultural base. Last year the administration of the island's research facilities was transferred from USDA to the Department of Homeland Security.

The 200-odd employees do not live on the island; they commute from their homes in Connecticut and Long Island. The facility is only accessible by government ferry, and local sailors who have strayed too close have reported being warned off in no uncertain terms by armed military personnel. The diseases being researched do not live exclusively under glass"there are quite a number of infected live animals for study there. Some of these diseases have an incubation period extending for days.

Which means that it is entirely possible for a researcher to be unknowingly infected on a Friday and then spend the weekend cheerfully spreading some hideous plague from the Hamptons to Tribeca. The government claims that there has only been one outbreak on the island"foot-and-mouth in 1978"which they contained by killing all the livestock. They further maintain that there has never been a leak to the mainland. Apparently the first appearance of what we now call Lyme disease a mere 13 miles northeast of the facility falls under the category of coincidence, as does the mysterious and still unexplained appearance of West Nile virus in Long Island and New York City.

Coincidences, it seems, abound at Plum.

Until 1991, all of the employees were federal. During 1991 and ,92, the workforce bifurcated, with many of the jobs

being turned over to the private sector, which naturally led to a simmering resentment in the ranks. On August 13, 2002, the resentment came to a full boil and a strike was called: 76 members of the International Union of Operating Engineers walked out at midnight after negotiations on wages and benefits broke down. The union members, employed by a government subcontractor, LB&B Associates, headquartered in Columbia, MD, were responsible for essential support services such as decontamination, waste-water treatment, keeping the generators in working order and other maintenance and safety-oriented occupations. For the duration of the strike, temps were brought in to replace them, the sentinels and technicians of the island's infrastructure.

By the end of that month, the FBI had been called to the island to investigate allegations of sabotage. It seems that the water pressure on the island fell precipitously, disabling decontamination facilities and the necropsy rooms used to examine dead animals. The union blamed the problem on the inexperienced temporary replacement workers, suggesting that they had not been adequately screened and lacked the training to properly maintain the essential daily activity of the island, let alone handle an emergency. Jacob Bunch, a spokesman for LB&B, refused to comment on the FBI investigation and responded to a New York Times reporter's query about the replacement

workers by stating that "In terms of training, I will tell you that people are well trained or they wouldn't be there. I am not going to get into how they are trained." He flatly refused to discuss the issue of security clearances.

The strike and the FBI investigation drew unwanted attention to the island. Local residents in Connecticut and Long Island have long harbored suspicions about the nature of the research being done on "Mystery Island," as some call it. One local politician was quoted as saying, "I have gotten calls from constituents asking if it is safe. People worry about Plum Island under routine circumstances, so you can expect that they worry more when circumstances are as unusual as these."

Press requests to visit the island were denied by both the FBI and the USDA, but one union official claimed to have received a frantic call from one of the replacement workers. As he put it, "They were sleeping on cots, working 12- hour shifts and not being able to make calls off the island. He described their condition as being held captive." The chief operating officer of LB&B, Ed Brandon, scoffed at the report, saying that the worker in question had already left the island and that everything was under control and running smoothly.

As a result of the FBI investigation, one of the strikers,

Mark J. DePonte, pleaded guilty to tampering with government property. Coincidentally, in October a 600-gallon container of liquid nitrogen somehow managed to tumble off the rear of one of the island's ferries. Shortly thereafter, it was revealed that at least one of the replacement workers had an arrest record.

During the fifth month of the strike, a three-hour power outage renewed public interest in the island. It certainly piqued my interest. On that day, I could not help but fixate on Stephen King's *The Stand* and Larry Underwood's trek through a sea of corpses in the Lincoln Tunnel, clawing his way out to Jersey. I found the failure of all three of the island's backup generators particularly provocative. Jovial corporate gasbag Ed Brandon had nothing to say about the inability of the replacement workers to operate the generators after five months on the job, and his erstwhile associate Jacob Bunch was equally dumbstruck.

I packed up the car, scored some weed, picked up my girlfriend and headed to the Jersey Shore, just to be on the safe side. Coincidence and stupidity will kill you just as dead as conspiracy and evil genius, if the wind is right, so we holed up in a motel in Ocean City and followed the story from there.

The only reason the incident went public at all was that

one of the replacement workers basically flipped a gasket and called Hillary Clinton's office, spilling the beans on the power failure to one of her staffers. The worker stated that, "The reason I am coming forward is because what I have seen at the center is really out of hand and something needs to be done about it."

And just like that, the possibility of disaster was in the open.

Without power, the air filtration systems are inoperable. Without power, decontamination procedures break down. Without power, the seals in the pressurized airlock doors start to deflate. According to one report, workers were desperately sealing the doors with duct tape.

My girlfriend and I stayed in Ocean City for a few days, walking the deserted frozen boardwalk together and monitoring the news for any signs of an incipient human die-off in New York. The most frightening book I have ever read is Laurie Garrett's *The Coming Plague*, a comprehensive overview of emerging rain-forest viruses and antibiotic-resistant bacteria. I was so badly rattled that I actually put the book down about three-quarters of the way through. Sitting down there at the Jersey Shore, watching the whitecaps roll in through the desolate frozen darkness on the longest night of the year, it was all too

easy to imagine Manhattan in the throes of a deadly epidemic triggered by some half-wit scab's inability to figure out the basics of generator maintenance and operation.

I took an inventory of the worst zoonotic plagues I could think of: Nipah virus, anthrax, Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis, Hanta virus"

Hanta, I recalled, is transmitted in rodent feces. There was an outbreak in the Four Corners area in the southwest, back in the early 90s. The vector? Pinola nuts contaminated by rat shit.

I reflected on the mother of all plagues, the incomparable Ebola virus, the deadliest strain of which, Ebola Zaire, has a 90 percent kill rate. Transmission is ridiculously easy: The victim starts sneezing at a certain point early in the infection, and the sneeze contains aerosolized droplets of infected blood. Ba-da-bing, ba-da-bang, ba-da-boom"you,ve got it. In about 10 days, you bleed out and die as your cardio-vascular system Well, your cardio-vascular system just sort of melts. Ebola Zaire would burn through this city like a fire in a cardboard factory.

Up in New Haven, CT, in 1994, a worker at Yale University's Arbovirus Laboratory became infected with

Sabia virus, went home, then took a little jaunt to Boston, where it became apparent to him that his symptoms were serious. More recently, in February of this year, a Fort Detrick researcher inadvertently stuck herself with a needle containing one of the three known Ebola variants. None of the reports of the incident specified which strain, but one can only assume it was the relatively benign Ebola Reston, as she was permitted to go home and gather some "necessities" before being placed in quarantine the next day. She was released from quarantine on March 3.

Sometimes you get lucky.

The research at Plum Island has taken some very alarming turns. In 2001, the New York Times revealed the existence of the Defense Department's "Project Jefferson," an effort to develop a vaccine-resistant form of anthrax. The Pentagon responded to the story by asserting that the project would be completed and the results classified.

Last year, a St. Louis University virologist by the name of Mark Buller revealed in a characteristically dry academic report that he was tinkering with a more lethal form of mousepox, a relative of smallpox, and intended to extend this work to cowpox, which can infect humans. Buller's intent is to devise countermeasures against making pox viruses more lethal, but the central conundrum of

bioweaponry defense research is that, by necessity, it entails offensive bioweaponry research.

For his part, Buller is aware of the problem. "When you have thrown a lot of money at it," he told Mother Jones magazine, "people start to think very hard about what is possible, losing sight of what is practical."

Problem is, this research doesn't take place in a vacuum. These researchers are academics"they publish. As the hackers have been telling us for three decades, information wants to be free. So, creating increasingly deadly bioweapons in order to determine how they can be thwarted generates an endless spiral of increasingly potent plagues that must inevitably succumb to that most familiar and unforgiving of universal principles, Murphy's Law.

A lot of people in the know are sounding alarms about this. Richard Ebright, lab director at the Waksman Institute of Microbiology at Rutgers University, is quoted by Michael Scherer in this month's Mother Jones as saying, "That is work that creates a new vulnerability for the United States and the world. It's like the National Institute of Health was funding a research and development arm of Al Qaeda." Scherer also points out that the government is going full speed ahead with this sort of thing, doubling the Pentagon budget for chemical/biological warfare and pouring up to

\$10 billion into bioweaponry projects alone.

We are knee-deep in a new arms race, far more terrifying than anything the nukes race had to offer. Accidents happened with our nuclear launch protocols during the Cold War"we came close, far too close, on several occasions"and it's far easier to accidentally release a tick or a mosquito into the environment, or scratch oneself with an infected needle, than it is to inadvertently launch a missile.

Plum Island is 136 miles from the city, as the crow flies. If that crow should happen to land there briefly, perhaps to snack on a tempting bit of carrion, there is a realistic chance that the crow might then become patient zero, carrying back with it some unwholesome and unwelcome souvenir. Or consider the disgruntled, overworked generator mechanic suffering under the burden of a difficult divorce compounded by a bad reaction to Zoloft who goes postal"on a whole new level. Or maybe a series of unfortunate, coincidental and entirely benign failures will pile up like SUVs on black ice.

The list of possibilities for disaster goes on and on. I prefer not to be in close proximity to people who insist on flouting Murphy's Law, especially when they're toying around with what we euphemistically refer to these days as

Weapons of Mass Destruction. It's like drinking in a cop bar.

There's been a lot of blather and hoo-hah in the news around here lately that New Yorkers are unprepared for another major disaster along the lines of the Sept. 11 attacks. Very few businesses have established any kind of emergency preparedness drills or protocols, and the average citizen seems to be living in some hideously banal postmodern fog of confusion and denial. A friend of mine up in Inwood bought an ultralight kayak, figuring to haul it down to the estuary there and paddle away to Jersey if and when the bodies start piling up.

Even if nothing ever happens, it's a great toy in the summer months.

For more on Plum Island, see Jim Knipfel's review of Michael Christopher Carroll's *Lab 257: The Disturbing Story of the Government's Secret Plum Island Germ Laboratory*, p. 40.

<http://www.nypress.com/17/11/news&columns/feature.cfm>

Patricia A. Doyle, PhD

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