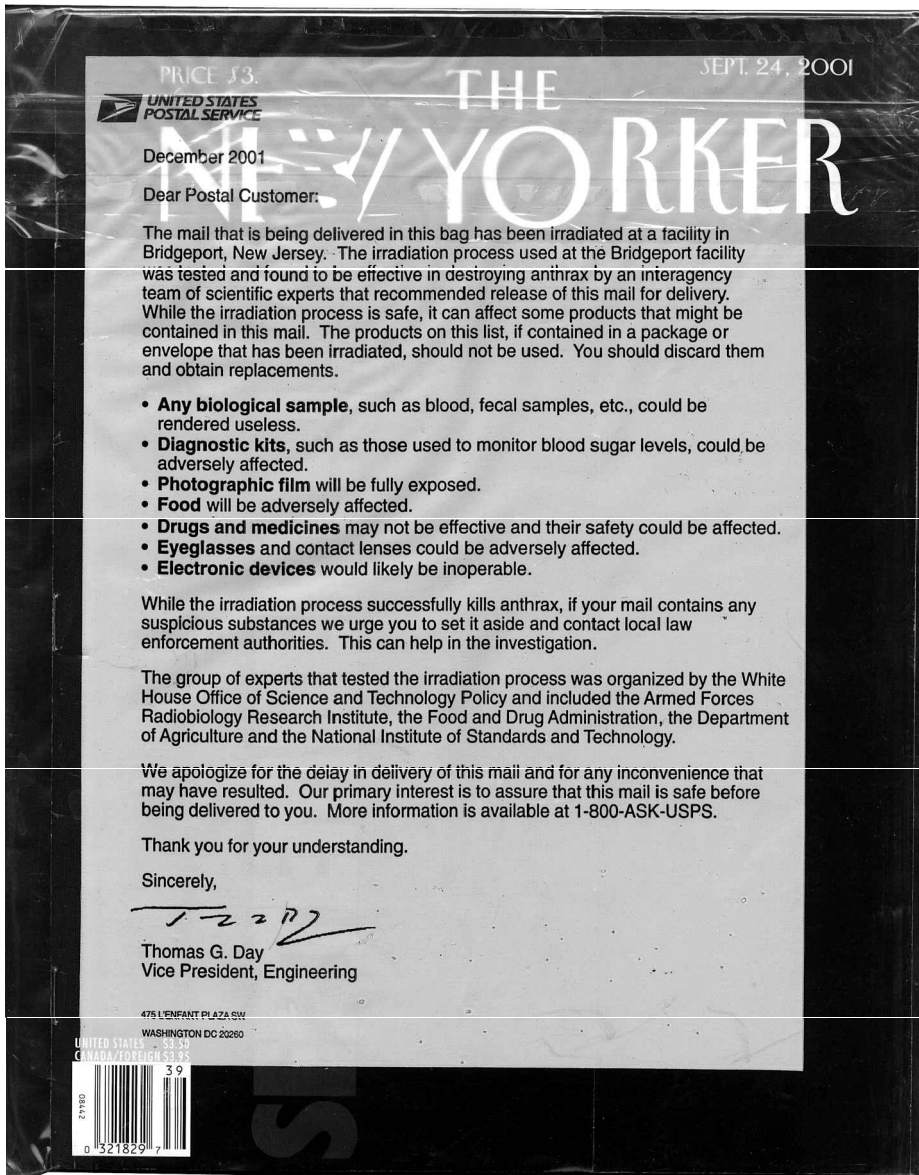


Irradiated copy of the *New Yorker*  
delivered December 2001.



# Dangerous Fragments

NICK B. KING

Richard Preston's *The Cobra Event* (1997) was by most accounts a commercial failure. The "fact-based novel," which chronicled a bioterrorist's release of the genetically engineered "Cobra virus" in New York City and Washington, D.C., reportedly earned him a \$3 million advance, and the first printing ran at least 250,000 copies. Yet total sales of this hugely anticipated follow-up to his best-seller *The Hot Zone* (1994) proved disappointing, and the hardcover was quickly consigned to the remainder pile.<sup>1</sup>

The book nevertheless had a considerable impact at the highest levels of government. One of its readers, President William Jefferson Clinton, was impressed enough by its warning of impending catastrophe to pass it along to intelligence analysts, Defense Secretary William Cohen, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich.<sup>2</sup> Clinton subsequently announced the development of a series of antibioterrorism initiatives, for which he requested an additional \$294 million in his fiscal year 1999 budget request. In April 1998 Preston provided testimony for Senate hearings regarding "Threats to America: Are We Prepared?"<sup>3</sup> And in a 1999 special issue of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala began her article "Bioterrorism: How Prepared Are We?" by outlining the plot of Preston's novel.<sup>4</sup>

Preston's novel crystallized an American discourse on biological terrorism that had been developing for a number of years. During the late 1980s and 1990s, American national security and public-health experts became increasingly concerned that the United States was vulnerable to attacks using biological weapons. Like Preston himself, these bioterrorism experts treaded a fine line between speculation and analysis, constructing fictional scenarios in order to develop medical and political responses to future events. Like his novel, the American discourse on bioterrorism is both a legitimate response to a nascent threat and a subterranean dialogue shaped by peculiarly American ambitions and anxieties about social change in a globalizing era. This discourse shapes discussions of, and responses to, the recent cases of anthrax in the eastern United States.

At a pivotal moment in *The Cobra Event*, bioweapons inspector Mark Littleberry and FBI agent Frank Masaccio try to piece together the identity of their bioterrorist quarry. Upon learning that the Cobra virus contains elements of smallpox, the common cold, and a nuclear polyhedrosis virus found in

moths, they speculate that it might have been produced in a Russian biological weapons facility:

“Biopreparat [the Soviet biological weapons program] was a Humpty Dumpty,” Littleberry told Masaccio. “It fell into pieces when the Soviet Union broke. . . . The Biopreparat that’s visible is the part that makes face cream and vodka. Another chunk was pulled into the Russian military. There may be other invisible pieces of Biopreparat floating around. Dangerous fragments. Maybe Biopreparat has an Evil Child. Maybe the Evil Child has no connection to Russia anymore.”

“So you think an Evil Child has put together the Cobra virus?” Masaccio said, incredulously, “You think it’s the *Russians*?”

Littleberry smiled. “Not exactly. The Cobra virus is so beautiful and so new that it has to be American engineering, Frank. Has to be. Looking at that virus is like looking at a starship. But the smallpox in it—that’s ancient and old and smells like Russia. . . . Here’s what I think. I think Cobra has two makers. One is American and one is Russian. They’ve gotten together somehow, and there’s money involved. There has to be. I think there’s a company in this. Cobra does come from an Evil Child. And I think the Evil Child is an American company operating somewhere near New York City.”<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Littleberry, first introduced to readers as he oversees a U.S. navy biological-weapons test conducted in 1969, is the archetypal American disease detective of the post– cold war world. To him, bioterrorism is the product and the symbol of a new world disorder in which the dangerous fragments of a fractured Cold War order recombine in frighteningly novel and unfamiliar ways. This Evil Child of globalization is a monstrous hybrid, fusing East and West, ancient natural pathogens and space-age technology, military research and private science, in a process lubricated by capital’s universal solvent, money.

### **Space**

The bioterrorist is both the symbol and the material offspring of geopolitical and technological remappings of *space* in the late twentieth century. Discussions of the threat that he (for the bioterrorist is invariably characterized as male) presents attempt to make sense of that remapping. It is no accident that Littleberry seizes on the end of the cold war as a turning point. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, nation-states sought to contain biological weapons through the political institutions and binary logic of cold war politics. The scientific expertise, technology, and institutions necessary to weaponize biological agents were located exclusively in the major

nation-states. Limiting the development and deployment of biological weapons could be accomplished, however imperfectly, through time-tested channels of state-to-state diplomacy and international conventions. The threat presented by biological weapons was thus easily mapped onto cold war space: they were produced within the borders of enemy states; they might be deployed against civilians or armed forces in the event of a conflict between the superpowers; they could be monitored through open and covert surveillance of enemy states; and they could be contained through agreements between nations.

The end of the cold war and the acceleration of political-economic globalization rendered this mapping untenable. In its place the New World Order of the 1990s featured a proliferation of threats dispersed through a fragmented and reconfigured geopolitical space. “Rogue nations” such as North Korea, Libya, and Iraq, with erratic and unpredictable leaders at their helm, were uncontainable by conventional diplomacy and openly hostile to the United States. Several were suspected of developing biological weapons on their own or of sponsoring their development by “nonstate actors,” individuals and organizations that Walter Laqueur identified in 1996 as harbingers of “postmodern terrorism.” This “bewildering multiplicity of terrorist and potentially terrorist groups and sects . . . espousing varieties of nationalism, religious fundamentalism, fascism, and apocalyptic millenarianism” could not be easily located and isolated within geopolitical space.<sup>6</sup>

When Masaccio wonders whether “the Russians” developed the Cobra virus, Littleberry smiles, then gently reminds him that their quarry is the product of a changed world. The bioterrorist’s national affiliations are unclear or multiple, his identity heterogeneous, his motivations and goals unrecognizable or obscure. Diplomacy, weapons conventions, and—as the failure of international surveillance efforts after the 1991 Persian Gulf War proved—even warfare are apparently useless in preventing him from developing biological weapons. The boundaries of the nation-state, and the presumption that global political life is governed by the relationship between states, no longer lends security in a borderless world. Dangerous states and ideologies have given way to dangerous fragments, circulating globally and freely transgressing the boundaries of the modern world.

## **Networks**

These transgressions are facilitated by the bioterrorist’s ability to navigate and manipulate *networks*. Global networks of transportation, trade, and information allow him to secretly acquire or construct, and rapidly and efficiently disseminate, his weapons of mass destruction to American cities. Unrestricted global trade gives him access to the tools and materials necessary

for the production of his weapons.<sup>7</sup> The acceleration of international travel and commerce facilitates the delivery of biological weapons from almost any source to almost any target. The networks that Americans depend upon to deliver their intellectual and industrial products could be turned against them by the bioterrorist: in his hands, even the U.S. mail is a weapons delivery system.

The bioterrorist takes advantage of virtual as well as physical networks that allow him access to scientific information. Initially, informational exchange necessitated geographic movement. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, former members of its biological-weapons program with the technical skill to weaponize biological materials were dispersed across the planet. Ironically, these invisible pieces of Littleberry's Humpty Dumpty could prove more dangerous in the absence of an Evil Empire than inside it. Cast adrift in the frighteningly unstable world of global capitalism, and with few economic resources at home, Russian biologists and chemists might resort to offering their services to terrorist organizations as mercenary scientists-for-hire.

With the proliferation of global informational networks, the potential bioterrorist need not rely on Russian expertise. Complex biotechnological knowledge is no longer contained within the confines of a few expert individuals or institutions. Research takes place in an increasing number of unsupervised locations, including heretofore technologically unsophisticated sovereign states, academic institutions with little or no administrative oversight, and commercial locations, from small biotechnology startups to multinational pharmaceutical corporations. The information that they produce seems to be readily and anonymously available to anyone. In 1998 one group of national security experts noted with alarm that

the ability to acquire information of all kinds, quickly and with ease, is increasing. The Internet contains a vast amount of information relevant to the planning and execution of complex violent acts. . . . Much of this information has been present in libraries for years, but access to it has never been easier. Today's violent non-state actors are able to start substantially higher on the terrorist learning curve.<sup>8</sup>

The proliferation and circulation of this information has also changed the language of biological weapons. Cold war weapons conventions (and Soviet/American disputes) relied on a distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" research, prohibiting the former. Never easy to demonstrate in practice, this distinction became increasingly untenable as biological science grew more sophisticated. By the late 1980s, as both the Soviet Union and the United States funded research into biological weapons, it had collapsed

entirely. In its place commentators argued that biological research and technology were inherently “dual use.”<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, *all* research into the manipulation and control of bare life, be it military, industrial, or academic, has the potential to spawn Evil Children.

After tracking the Cobra Virus to Bio-Vek, a small New Jersey biotechnology company, one of Littleberry’s colleagues speculates on its links to a multinational that employs Russian scientists: “‘Bio-Vek may be connected to BioArk, the company that Vestof said she works for,’ Hopkins said. ‘Maybe the two companies are swapping strains and technology.’” Littleberry tersely responds, “Welcome to the global village.”<sup>10</sup> Operating at the junction between commercial, informational, and scientific economies, the bioterrorist represents the darkest potential of globalization.

### **Infection**

It is unsurprising that bioterrorism inspires exceptional anxiety and repugnance. After all, Americans have repeatedly viewed the expansion of international migration and commerce through the lens of infectious disease, associating it with alterity and the transgression of political and corporeal borders. During the successive waves of immigration to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Americans blamed epidemics of smallpox in San Francisco on Chinese immigrants and held Italians responsible for increases in polio in New York City. In the most famous instance of nativist anxieties determining public health policy, the Irish immigrant Mary Mallon—popularly known as “Typhoid Mary”—was incarcerated for twenty-five years on a small island near New York City. More recently, Americans identified first Haiti and then Africa as the origin of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>11</sup> In the last decade of the twentieth century, they wondered whether the globalization of international travel and commerce might bring exotic new “emerging” infections such as the Ebola and West Nile viruses to American shores.<sup>12</sup>

Like his predecessors in the American imaginary, the bioterrorist—that disconcerting hybrid—transforms global networks into conduits of infection and symbolizes American fears of racial, ethnic, and national contamination. Yet the bioterrorist threatens not just transgression but fragmentation and recombination of national and corporeal boundaries. Whereas Typhoid Mary was a passive carrier of germs within her body, the bioterrorist is an active agent, blending science and nature into political weapons. At his most sinister he utilizes recombinant molecular technology to fashion a literal viral hybrid, merging elements of disparate viruses and bacteria into a chimerical, pathogenic monster.<sup>13</sup> This “sophisticated” bioterrorist—a twenty-first-century “dressed native”—captures American speculative

biotechnology and uses it for his putatively atavistic, ideological, or religious purposes. He thus transforms science, symbol of American economic and political modernity, into a technology of contamination.

Infectious disease has long been a powerful symbol of sociospatial and corporeal transgression; this potency remains undiminished. Yet infection also refracts contemporary social change in historically peculiar ways, marking the nonplaces and networks of modern life, heretofore benign conduits of travel and commerce, as locations of risk and uncertainty. Bioterrorism should force us to rethink the utility of the network as a signifier and an object of analysis. Networks are dangerous: they establish proximity between places and provide conduits for infection. The “network society” is not only an abstracted space of flows in which trade and commerce are accelerated.<sup>14</sup> It is also a fearsome new world in which dangerous fragments circulate and recombine in ways that threaten bodies, identities, and even places in novel ways.

## Conclusion

Long before October of last year, American scientific and security experts argued that bioterrorism “preparedness” should become a fundamental part of routine public health.<sup>15</sup> Their recommendations—better management and control of national borders, more efficient collection and management of intelligence and epidemiological information, acceleration of biotechnological research, and development of vaccines and therapeutic agents—have become conventional wisdom during the past several months. These solutions have a familiar ring to them. What is represented as a fragmented postmodern threat is countered by a resolutely modern faith in the reconstitution of national boundaries and a reliance upon progress in information science

The screenshot shows an eBay auction page for "CIPRO, Bayer, 500 mg,100 Tablets" (Item # 1715136826). The page is viewed in a browser window with the address bar showing "http://cgi.ebay.com/us/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=1715136826". The eBay logo and navigation menu are visible at the top. The auction details are as follows:

<b>CIPRO, Bayer, 500 mg,100 Tablets</b>			
Item # 1715136826			
Everything Else Health & Beauty Medical Supplies Other			
Currently	<b>US \$100.00</b>	First bid	<b>US \$100.00</b>
Quantity	1	# of bids	0 <a href="#">bid history</a>
Time left	<b>6 days, 1 hours +</b>	Location	<b>India</b>
		Country	<b>USA</b>
Started	Mar-19-02 18:44:13 FST	<a href="#">mail this auction to a friend</a>	
Ends	Mar-26-02 18:44:13 FST	<a href="#">watch this item</a>	
Seller (Rating)	<a href="#">chempluscorp (0)</a>		
	<a href="#">view comments in seller's Feedback Profile</a>   <a href="#">view seller's other auctions</a>   <a href="#">ask seller a question</a>		
High bid	--		
Payment	Money Order/Cashiers Checks. Personal Checks. Visa/MasterCard. Discover. American Express. See item description for payment methods accepted		
Shipping	Buyer pays fixed shipping charges. Will ship to United States only. See item description for shipping charges.		
Seller Services	<a href="#">Revise item</a>		

Seller assumes all responsibility for listing this item. You should contact the seller to resolve any questions before bidding. Auction currency is U.S. dollars (US \$) unless otherwise noted.

**Description**

CIPRO manufactured by Bayer for treatment of Anthrax. Will be shipped from India in about two weeks after payment by registered mail. Best possible expiration date

and biotechnology.<sup>16</sup> Thus, public-health officials respond to the dispersive and heterogeneous logic of bioterrorism by resorting to a nostalgia for impermeable boundaries and a naive faith in technological fixes.

Alternative responses to dangerous fragments are possible. To begin with, we would do well to take note of David Harvey's observation that "globalization" is ultimately about the sociospatial relations between billions of embodied individuals.<sup>17</sup> It should come as no surprise that global economic networks, which benefit the few under the guise of benefiting the many, might be transformed into political networks and turned against those few beneficiaries. Perhaps the specter of bioterrorism will inspire Americans to recognize that they are subject to the terrifying vicissitudes of global pathways and hybridizations. Non-Americans, their bodies suffering the ill effects of political and economic decisions made thousands of miles away, have long recognized this.



## Notes

The author would like to thank Warwick Anderson, Jennifer Fishman, and Felicity Scott for helpful comments on this essay.

1. Richard Preston, *The Cobra Event* (New York: Random House, 1997); Preston, *The Hot Zone* (New York: Random House, 1994); Paul Nathan, "Big Deal," *Publishers Weekly* 244, no. 40 (29 September 1997): 23; Judy Quinn, "Cobra's Eye," *Publishers Weekly* 244, no. 25 (23 June 1997): 22–24; and Judy Quinn, "A 'Big Book' Correction," *Publishers Weekly* 245, no. 12 (23 March 1998): 41–49.

2. Lawrence Kaplan, "A Bridge Too Far," *The National Interest* (Fall 1999): 135–139; Ehud Sprinzak, "The Great Superterrorism Scare," *Foreign Policy* 112 (Fall 1998): 110–123; and Stephen S. Hall, "Science-Fiction Policy," *Technology Review* (November–December 1998): 92. In a 1999 interview with the *New York Times*' William Broad and Judith Miller, Clinton cited *The Cobra Event* as a "futuristic novel" that he found "interesting, especially when he said what his sources were, which seemed fairly credible to me." This interview is available at <http://clinton6.nara.gov/1999/01/1999-01-21-interview-of-the-president-by-the-new-york-times.html>.

3. Preston's prepared statement before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Government Information and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on Chemical and Biological Weapons is available from: <http://www.senate.gov/~judiciary/preston.htm>.

4. Donna E. Shalala, "Bioterrorism: How Prepared Are We?" *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 5, no. 4 (July–August 1999): 492–493.

5. Preston, *Cobra Event*, 284.

6. Walter Laqueur, "Postmodern Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 5 (September/October 1996): 28, 33. For an extensive list of international terrorist organizations circa 1990, see Raymond Allan Zilinskas, "Terrorism and Biological Weapons: Inevitable Alliance?" *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 34, no. 1 (Autumn 1990): 65–70. See also Jonathan B. Tucker ed., *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

7. During the 1990s the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo cult, the Iraqi weapons programs, and Christian Patriot Larry Wayne Harris were able to purchase weaponization materials, including production equipment, agents, culture media, and seed stocks, from American companies.

8. Richard A. Falkenrath, Robert D. Newman, and Bradley A. Thayer, eds. *America's Achilles Heel: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 174–176.

9. In 2000 Laurie Garrett observed that every putatively benign biomedical discovery contained a hidden Faustian bargain: "Today every aspect of biology research and development is far cheaper, easier to hide and simpler to execute than the weapons technology of the cold war. Basic biomedical research under way in top private and public laboratories could prove useful for insidious weapons development. . . . The bottom line is the so-called 'dual-use' dilemma: Every breakthrough in biomedical research also has the potential of destroying significant segments of humanity." Laurie Garrett, "Experts: It's Time to 'Be Paranoid,'" *Newsday* (29 November 2000), A8.

10. Preston, *Cobra Event*, 311.

11. Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997),

166; Alan M. Kraut, *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Typhoid Mary: Captive to the Public's Health* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Paul Farmer, *AIDS and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Warwick Anderson, "Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution," *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Spring 1995): 640–669.

12. These topics are covered in detail in Nicholas Benjamin King, "Infectious Disease in a World of Goods" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2001).

13. The recurring use of the word *chimera* is instructive. The lethal agent featured in *Mission Impossible 2*, product of Biocyte Pharmaceuticals' Russian molecular biologist, is a genetically engineered pathogen called "Chimera." The virologist heroes of Preston's novel discover that their quarry had fashioned his "Cobra" virus with elements from a moth virus called nuclear polyhedrosis, smallpox, and (in a chapter entitled "Chimera") the common cold. Russian defector Ken Alibek quotes a colleague as saying that, inspired by Western genetics research, "we believe we can create a chimera virus." See Ken Alibek and Stephen Handelman, *Biohazard: The Chilling True Story of the Largest Covert Biological Weapons Program in the World—Told from the Inside by the Man Who Ran It* (New York: Random House, 1999), 259.

14. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996).

15. See, for example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Biological and Chemical Terrorism: Strategic Plan for Preparedness and Response. Recommendations of the CDC Strategic Planning Workgroup," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 49, no. RR-4 (April 21, 2000): 1–14.

16. Similar themes can be seen in American responses to the informational terror of the Y2K bug. Jennifer Ruth Fosket and Jennifer Fishman, "Constructing the Millennium Bug: Trust, Risk, and Technological Uncertainty," *CTheory* (13 October 1999), available online at [http://www.ctheory.net/text\\_file.asp?pick=216](http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=216).

17. "The body cannot be understood, theoretically or empirically, outside of an understanding of globalization. But conversely, boiled down to its simplest determinations, globalization is about the socio-spatial relations between billions of individuals." David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 16.