

America's Bioweapon Secrets

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✓ Fact Checked

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland, is home to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases where deadly agents like Ebola, smallpox and anthrax are studied
- › Fort Detrick research has included testing biological agents, exposing animals and humans to toxic sprays, engineering dust to float like anthrax and creating lethal drops, powders, sprays, toothpaste and cigars intended to assassinate foreign leaders
- › Safety lapses are known to occur; in 2002, anthrax was leaked from Fort Detrick and it was later reported that “multiple episodes of contamination may have occurred”
- › While offensive biowarfare research was ended in the U.S. in 1969, and the U.S. and China adopted a treaty banning the development of bioweapons, there are loopholes. Namely, defensive bioweapons research is still allowed

For months, the very mention of the lab-leak hypothesis, which suggests that SARS-CoV-2 leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, would lead to censorship and dismissal.

Academics and public health officials staunchly defended the natural-origin theory for SARS-CoV-2 since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic until, finally, in May 2021, the U.S. government ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to look into COVID-19's origins and, after 90 days, produce a preliminary report.

The classified report was delivered in August 2021, but its results were reportedly inconclusive, with intelligence agencies unable to pinpoint whether COVID-19 has a natural or laboratory origin.¹ Prior to the report's release, Antony Blinken, secretary of state, said China had failed to "meet its basic responsibilities in terms of sharing information and providing access."²

China is also fighting back against the probe by highlighting America's bioweapon secrets — namely Fort Detrick in Frederick, Maryland, a U.S. Army Medical Research and Development Command (MRDC) installation most well-known for being a center for biomedical research and development.

China Suggests Fort Detrick COVID-19 Investigation

The pandemic has highlighted controversial gain-of-function (GOF) research carried out on bat coronaviruses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). Less talked about is Fort Detrick, a U.S.-based laboratory that is one of 59 worldwide that handles the deadliest of pathogens.

As the Boston Globe reported, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman called for "a thorough probe into the Fort Detrick lab to find the truth of coronavirus." Speaking at a Beijing press conference, the spokesman added:³

"Why hasn't the US invited the World Health Organization in for an investigation into Fort Detrick? Why can't origins study be conducted in the US just as in China? The US should show transparency, tell as much as they know about all the questions, and respond to the concerns of the outside world."

Fort Detrick is home to the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, where deadly agents like Ebola, smallpox and anthrax are studied. It spans 13,000 acres and 600 buildings surrounded by suburban sprawl — but when it was first developed nearly eight decades ago, the location was chosen for its isolation.⁴

This was key, since it was the epicenter of the U.S. offensive biological warfare program until such research was largely banned in 1969.⁵

During World War II, when biological agents were among the top military threats, “Scientists converged at Camp Detrick in 1943 to develop defenses to protect our troops,” the official U.S. military history of Fort Detrick reads.⁶ “The research program at Fort Detrick pioneered the laboratory facility designs, equipment and procedures used for infectious disease research that are in place today in laboratories worldwide.”

The research included the enclosed “one million liter test sphere,” built in 1949 and referred to as the “8-ball.”⁷ Its nefarious purpose was to test how biological agents could be dispersed into the air. Writing in the Boston Globe, contributor Stephen Kinzer explained:⁸

“When I spent half a day there a few years ago, I found it both an eerie relic and an ultra-modern research institute. The rusting hulk of the One Million Liter Test Sphere, used during the 1950s to test toxic sprays on people and animals strapped into chambers inside, stands not far from sealed laboratory buildings where scientists work with potent bacteria.”

Fort Detrick’s Sordid Past

The U.S. military paints a glowing history of Fort Detrick, highlighting its cancer research center, which opened in 1972, and its role as a focal point for scientific research:⁹

“The Department of Homeland Security, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, the Department of Agriculture, and finally, the Center for Disease Control are joined together at Fort Detrick.

Future investment of biodefense research resources at Fort Detrick will take

advantage of the long history of biomedical achievement and biocontainment safety established here.”

The reality is far less rosy than its official history suggests, however. According to Kinzer:¹⁰

“During the Cold War, Fort Detrick was abuzz – literally – as scientists developed ingenious ways to infect mosquitoes with disease-causing germs and to weaponize fleas, ticks, ants, lice, and rats; cultivated spores that cause parasitic diseases in crops and livestock; and produced aerosolized toxins that could be used to kill either individuals or entire populations.

CIA chemists also maintained a lab there, producing among other things lethal drops, powders, sprays, toothpaste, and cigars intended to assassinate foreign leaders. For 21 months in 1959-61, Quakers and other activists held dawn-to-dusk vigils outside, asserting that the base existed 'to plan famine, starvation, and disease.’”

One of the first scientists assigned to Fort Detrick’s biological warfare laboratory during WWII was bioweapons expert Frank Olson.¹¹ In 1953, Frank Olson died after plummeting to the ground from a high-rise hotel room window in Manhattan.

The CIA claimed his death was a suicide, but it was later revealed that he was deliberately murdered after the CIA became concerned that he might reveal disturbing top-secret operations.

Olson’s Fort Detrick research included testing biological agents, including exposing animals to toxic clouds during Operation Harness, engineering dust to float like anthrax during Operation Sea Spray, and traveling to Fort Terry on Plum Island, where deadly toxins were tested off the U.S. mainland.¹²

In an edited extract from “Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control,” The Guardian reported:¹³

“Dr. Olson had developed a range of lethal aerosols in handy sized containers. They were disguised as shaving cream and insect repellants. They contained, among other agents, staph enterotoxin, a crippling food poison; the even more deadly Venezuelan equine encephalomyelitis; and most deadly of all, anthrax ...

Further weapons he was working on included a cigarette lighter which gave out an almost instant lethal gas, a lipstick that would kill on contact with skin and a neat pocket spray for asthma sufferers that induced pneumonia.”

Fort Detrick Center Warned of COVID-19 Prior to Pandemic

In 1979, the Army Medical Intelligence and Information Agency became part of Fort Detrick, its purpose to produce medical intelligence for the Defense Intelligence Agency.¹⁴ Now known as the National Center for Medical Intelligence (NCMI), its focus is on global disease outbreaks.

NCMI employs virologists, toxicologists, medical doctors and other experts who use communications intercepts, satellite imagery and even social media to gather intelligence, which it provides to the U.S. military and other branches of government.

Denis Kaufman, a retired NCMI officer, told NBC News, "The value that NCMI brings is that it has access to information streams that the World Health Organization does not have, nor does the Centers for Disease Control or anyone else."¹⁵

NCMI reportedly warned that COVID-19 would become a global pandemic at least a month before it was declared one, and is engaged in monitoring the pandemic, including whether foreign governments are covering up the nature of the disease.

NCMI has also collaborated with the National Security Agency (NSA) to extract “medical SIGINT [signals intelligence]” from the intercepted communications of nonprofit groups, looking into topics such as “SARS in China, cholera in Liberia, and dysentery, polio and cholera in Iraq.”¹⁶ One source of intelligence could be the

surveillance of medical devices and body monitors. As The Intercept reported in 2016:¹⁷

“The joint effort to mine ‘medical SIGINT’ is particularly noteworthy 13 years later, as medical devices and body monitors are increasingly connected to the internet, opening up new possibilities to expand intelligence gathering beyond epidemics and bioweapons and into more focused forms of surveillance.

The NSA’s deputy director, Richard Ledgett, said in June that the spy agency was ‘looking ... theoretically’ at exploiting biomedical devices like pacemakers in order to surveil targets, even as he admitted that there are often easier ways to spy.”

Documented Safety Lapses Have Occurred

Even with the best of intentions, biowarfare labs like those at Fort Detrick pose an immense safety risk, and contamination episodes are not uncommon. In 2002, anthrax was leaked from Fort Detrick, and it was later reported that “multiple episodes of contamination may have occurred.”¹⁸

The 2001 anthrax attacks also have ties to Fort Detrick, as Bruce Ivins, the FBI’s chief suspect in the attacks, was a senior biological weapons researcher there. He committed suicide in 2008 just before he was charged with the attacks.¹⁹

Fort Detrick was also stripped of its license to study highly restricted pathogens like Ebola, smallpox and anthrax by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2019. The move came after a CDC inspection found its recently installed chemical-based decontamination system may not be adequately treating the facility’s wastewater, which could mean that deadly pathogens could potentially escape.

In addition to mechanical failures by the decontamination system, the CDC inspectors cited researchers failing to follow proper rules.²⁰

Defensive Bioweapons Research Is Still Allowed

While offensive biowarfare research was ended in the U.S. in 1969, and the U.S. and China adopted a treaty banning the development of bioweapons, there are loopholes. Namely, defensive bioweapons research is still allowed, which means the U.S. and other countries are permitted to manufacture and study toxins that could be used against it by an enemy. As Kinzer pointed out:²¹

“These toxins, however, can also be seen as prototypes for weapons in a future battle fought with insects, vermin, and aerosolized germs. How intensely are Chinese and American scientists working within that legal gray area – or beyond it?”

Neutral inspection of both countries’ bio-labs might help answer those questions. By bringing up Fort Detrick, Beijing is sending a clear message to Washington: Since you aren’t revealing your secrets, don’t expect us to reveal ours.”