

# Who Speaks for Bio-Defense vs. Preventive War

by Clark Abt

[Back to Previous Page](#)

At the end of an April 14, 2003 PBS broadcast, "Avoiding Armageddon: Silent Killers: Poison and Plagues," presenting the threat of biological weapons, two international security authorities were asked what should be done about the threat of proliferating bio-weapons. Richard Perle, former Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Jessica Tuchman Mathews, President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, gave mutually antagonistic answers that offer almost equally grim prospects of never-ending preventive wars and ineffectual international negotiations.

Each advocated the long-held views of conservatives favoring preventive war and liberals favoring international arms control, but neither offered the more promising third alternative of preventive bio-defense.

Preventive defense against biological weapons can work better and with less risk and cost than the tried and untrue alternatives offered. Why was preventive bio-defense not mentioned? Could it be that lawyer and pentagon maven Perle did not have the biological sciences knowledge to know of a more effective defense than threatening preventive war against any militarily inferior bio-weapons proliferator such as Syria or Iraq?

But surely microbiology Ph.D. Jessica Mathews knows of the potential effectiveness of bio-defense consisting of a public health system augmented by early warning from environmental surveillance, plentiful supplies of vaccines and antibiotics, and prophylactic treatment on warning of people exposed to a bio-weapons attack? Why did she not offer that, instead of arguing the tired old (but still true though still insufficient) mantra of international cooperation on biological arms controls?

This truncated debate between two new warm warriors took me back forty years to the Kennedy Administration, when President Kennedy, confronted with what was then the supreme threat of nuclear weapons, insisted on a wider choice than all-out nuclear war or sacrifice of freedom and security.

He did not have the luxury of decisive military superiority that current promoters of war believe they have for violently disarming WMD proliferators, nor could he rely on a compliant UN Security Council. Instead he did the truly conservative and sensible thing, building up US defenses while continuing vigorous international diplomatic and arms control initiatives. That is still the best option to counter the new strategic threat of bio-weapons.

We do not know why no one in the PBS "Avoiding Armageddon" program spoke up for the most peaceful and dual-use productive preventive defense against biological warfare, a strengthened public health system augmented by bio-detectors for early warning, plentiful supplies of vaccines and antibiotics for prompt prophylactic treatment of those exposed, and professional and public education providing useful responses to a bio-weapons attack.

This is being developed by scientists and policy analysts in the Federal departments of Health and Human Services' CDC and NIAID, Energy's national laboratories, Defense's DTRA, DARPA and USAMRIID, and Homeland Security's Transportation Security Administration. Hopefully the next PBS broadcast on this topic will discuss these projects and provide the public with reasons for hope, rather than despair.

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