

Avian fascism

IF THERE'S any good to come out of the Gulf Coast tragedy, it's that Katrina is a harbinger warning of what the Bush junta has in store for us should an avian flu pandemic hit America. Katrina, like the Tsunami that hit Asia nine months earlier, also demonstrates how greed, political priorities and development priorities compounded the killing power of otherwise natural disasters.

In the case of the Avian flu, it's Third World urban poverty combined with the corporate model for factory farming chickens that has created the perfect environment to incubate a superflu. It goes like this – anti viral drugs are expensive and their production is limited due to patents held by large multinational pharmaceutical corporations. Tamiflu, the most effective anti-flu medication on the market today, for example, sells for at least \$40 per treatment, making it cost prohibitive in a world where over one billion people subsist on under one dollar per day. The French-owned Roche corporation owns the patent for the American-developed drug, manufacturing a limited supply in one drug plant in Switzerland. When South Africa and Thailand asked the World Health Organization to secure permission for the two countries to manufacture the drug generically at their own plants, France and the United States halted discussion on the question, effectively blocking the large scale production of affordable Tamiflu and guaranteeing an acute worldwide shortage. Prevailing market conditions guarantee that the world's poorest countries will be the least likely to afford whatever limited amount of Tamiflu is on the global market.

Compound this drug shortage with the reality that structural adjustment regimes imposed on "debtor nations" over the last generation by the World Bank have decimated public health systems around the world. Most countries don't have adequate supplies of anti-viral drugs or vaccines, nor do they have an adequate health care infrastructure to

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monitor the spread of diseases. Urban poverty has exacerbated this situation by concentrating billions of people in crowded unsanitary conditions without safe drinking water or sewage facilities – effectively creating superincubators for all communicable diseases ranging from tuberculosis to malaria. When a disease like influenza spreads quickly in a dense population, it maintains its virulence. Once a flu epidemic sweeps through any ill-prepared country, it will inevitably spread across the globe.

University of California professor Michael Davis, author of "The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu," also points out that the global chicken industry has created, over the past fifteen years, an environment in which new strains of influenza can quickly germinate. Davis singles out Tyson Foods (on whose board of directors Hillary Clinton formerly served) as creating the model in which unprecedented concentrations of chickens are raised in enormous warehouses, speeding up the "evolution of influenza [strains]" as the virus quickly passes through huge chicken populations. Abhorrent working conditions can put chicken industry workers in dangerous contact with infected chickens. Davis argues that we've "changed the nature of the disease by changing its ecology," creating the conditions for stronger strains of flu to emerge and new vectors for it to jump from birds to other populations.

The combination of industrialized chicken production, urban poverty, high population density, poor sanitary infrastructure and decimated public health care systems has created a perfect storm for a deadly flu pandemic – with the current H5N1 strain posing a serious threat to quickly mutate into a super-toxic virus with the ability to easily spread among human populations.

The American response

Epidemiologists, to no avail, have been sounding the alarm about H5N1 since 1997 to both the Clinton and Bush administrations. Rather than respond to the alarm, both administrations continued to support the very policies that were setting the conditions for a pandemic – using the WTO to open markets to chicken industrialization, and pushing further "structural adjustment" regimes defunding public health and sanitation infrastructure in the Third World. In the U.S., we only have enough Tamiflu to treat two percent of the population. If the New Orleans evacuation has taught us anything – it's who that two percent won't be. Way to go guys.

The situation at home is compounded further by the fact that the American healthcare system, in a quest to be "cost effective," decimated its surge capacity. This means that we don't have a ready supply of empty hospital beds, emergency rooms and intensive care units to deal with a large scale emergency. Our health care stratagem seems to be based

on the airline model, which seeks to keep all planes, and now hospitals, operating as close to capacity as possible. While this model works for the airlines – where empty seats flying in the sky equal lost revenue – it bodes disaster for our health care system, where we'd rather the rooms stay empty but ready. If a flu pandemic, or any other pandemic for that matter, hits, our bare-bones health care system will be overwhelmed. Once that happens, people will not only die from the flu – they'll die from a plethora of accidents and diseases because there won't be medical facilities to accommodate them.

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Only now, in the eleventh hour, with the devil knocking (or perhaps kicking) at the door, has the Bush administration responded with a strategy – developing a plan for a militarized response that's more frightening than the pandemic itself. Bush is currently requesting authority to mobilize the military against civilian populations in an attempt to quarantine cities where an infection occurs. It goes like this – if the flu pandemic hits and we get sick, there won't be medicine or hospital beds for us, but there'll be plenty of soldiers ready to shoot us.

Militarism is the Bush administration's one-thought solution to all problems. Of course, with trillions of dollars going to the military while our life-saving infrastructure is decimated with budget cuts, the Bushistas really left themselves no other choices but to use the only tool they have, abhorrently inappropriate for most situations as it may be.

It's also horribly ineffective. If avian flu hits a human population in the U.S., it clearly won't be the first or the only population to be affected – and cordoning off cities and trying to shoot people as they leave won't stop the disease's spread. Immediately nullifying Roche's exclusive patent rights to Tamiflu and marshalling global resources for mass scale production of the drug, as well as other anti-viral medications, would be a much more logical, rational and effective move – not to mention being the only sane move.

Now let's put all of this into the context of recent events. Bush's top lieutenants seem to be either under criminal investigation or under indictment. Republican House Majority Leader Tom Delay was arrested. Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist is being investigated by the S.E.C. for insider trading on a family-connected firm previously busted for ripping off Medicaid. Bush consigliere Karl Rove, along with Vice President Dick Cheney and His Chief of Staff, Scooter Libby, are all under investigation in the Valerie Plame affair. Bush opponents are calling for his impeachment and prosecution on seventeen different counts. All it will take is one alleged case of communicable human avian influenza, and all of this will be a moot point as we slip into martial law.