
WMD Terrorism

Science and Policy Choices

edited by Stephen M. Maurer

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Preface

By now, the country ought to know a great deal about WMD terrorism. For one thing, people have studied it for decades. Indeed, the Cold War started with obsessive fears of saboteurs carrying suitcase-sized atomic bombs, and most of what we know about nuclear, chemical, biological, and radiological weapons dates from the 1950s and 1960s. For another, research on WMD terrorism has expanded exponentially since September 11, 2001. Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory alone spent more than \$100 million on the topic last year. Anyone who has visited the national labs can appreciate how specialists' talks on, for example, cargo screening have proliferated. And universities are similarly awash in homeland security papers on everything from game theory to improved tort incentives.

And yet it is not enough. The hallmark of a mature academic subject—from chemistry to sociology—is a simple, standard, and above all shared way of looking at things. As the physicist Richard Feynman pointed out more than forty years ago, you do not really understand a subject until you can give a freshman talk. Measured by that deceptively simple criterion, the proliferation of specialist seminars and clever papers falls short. Eight years after September 11, speakers at homeland security conferences routinely begin their talks by admitting how little they know about each other's disciplines. Without a common intellectual framework, new scholars find it hard to get started and established researchers talk past each other. Most importantly, new insights either go unnoticed or are discovered over and over again.

Worse, society ignores what academics already know. When a well-known scholar complains that U.S. policymakers are “deliberately ignoring behavioral research” and “preferring hunches to science,” his frustration and anger are easy to see (Fischhoff 2006). Yet academics have not done nearly enough to present the logic and evidence that the Beltway needs. The consequence, inevitably, is that politicians are thrown back on intuition. Given that none of us has ever experienced a WMD attack, intuition has nothing to feed on. Or more accurately, nothing except

popular culture's long line of imagined WMD terrorists from *Thunderball* to *True Lies*.

This book is designed to give the interested reader a thorough grounding in WMD terrorism and show her where to learn more. This happens to be a particularly good time for such a project. Much has been learned over the past eight years, and our authors have worked hard to pull this information together. There are also much older currents to draw on. For the national labs, WMD terrorism recalls more than sixty years of previous work on nuclear weapons and deterrence. Universities can similarly offer powerful tools ranging from economics to social psychology to political science. The reader can judge for herself how much has been done to mine these traditions, and how much remains.