

ACT OF TERRORISM

Professor accused of stealing plague punished too lightly

Reports of 30 stolen vials of the bubonic plague at Texas Tech University were mentioned by The Associated Press earlier this month, triggering instant national news paired with the catch-phrase 'bioterrorism.' Sixty FBI agents were put on the case, working throughout the night to prevent the outbreak of an epidemic. The case was solved when Dr. Thomas Butler, chief of the infectious diseases division at Tech, admitted to misleading federal authorities about the whereabouts of the vials. The professor destroyed them himself, according to reports from CNN.

Of course, Americans are a little on edge about the whole threat of a biological attack. The Homeland Security Agency has done a good job of brainwashing the public into seeing a terrorist under every rock. After all, in the right hands, any stolen vials intended for research could be coated with polymer and aerosolized, then disseminated in subways or inside other enclosed areas.

Butler told police that on Jan. 1 he had 30 test tubes in a rack on a table in his laboratory. On the morning of Jan. 11, Butler "discovered that person(s) had taken the test tubes from the rack," in a written statement made after he was questioned by FBI agents, according to CNN. The laboratory was locked, and there were no signs of forced entry. In his statement, Butler wrote: "I made a misjudgment by not telling my supervisor that the plague bacteria had been accidentally destroyed earlier rather than erroneously first found missing."

A man who is internationally recognized in the field, and who worked with the plague for 25 years, should

not have accidentally destroyed the vials, panicked and then filed a false police report. Butler told CNN that he wasn't aware that the incident could trigger such a massive investigation. Of course, all this leads to one question: where has Butler been since Sept. 11, 2001?

The university has placed Butler on paid leave, changed the locks on his laboratory, blocked him from computer access and banned him from campus, according to a university spokesperson. If convicted of making a false statement to a federal agent, he could face up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Conditions for bail included \$100,000, surrendering his passport, abiding by a curfew, submitting to electronic monitoring and putting up his home as collateral.

He's getting off rather easy. I'm surprised the federal courts haven't thrown the entire book of federal felonies at Butler.

What is surprising is exactly how negligent the government's rules are on who in the country is permitted to handle viruses such as ebola and the bubonic plague. At the time of Butler's investigation, the Feds had a list of persons restricted from handling biological agents, but had put no agency in charge of enforcing those rules. In addition, the federal government currently has no oversight in place for the hundreds of medical labs handling samples of anthrax, bubonic plague bacteria, ebola and smallpox viruses. More so, required background checks for workers handling such agents won't go into effect until Feb. 13. Homeland Security Legislation is passing



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through Congress, but at too slow a rate to be effective.

On behalf of the nation, I'd say that we are all pretty lucky that Butler's hoax was only a hoax. Unfortunately, there aren't a whole lot of federal laws in existence making sure that it wasn't.

U.S. officials have had reason to suspect Saddam Hussein of breeding deadly viruses deep underground in secret laboratories of the Middle East, but the greatest biological threat may sting us from within our own borders. After all, when terrorists can access biological hazards right here in the United States, they don't have to go to the trouble of bringing them in. The

Butler hoax proved them both readily available and easily accessible.

Butler's wife told CNN she believes the situation is being blown out of proportion. Out of proportion? Bacteria and viruses, such as the plague, are widely available to researchers at universities across the United States, and one in seven cases reported in the United States is fatal. Between 10 and 20 people a year are infected annually in the United States; globally, 1,000 to 3,000 cases are reported. Butler should be charged with a lot more than making a false statement to an FBI agent.

Leann Bickford is a freshman business administration major.

EDITORIAL

COST OF DEREGULATING

Burden of tuition deregulation falls on students

With dwindling state funds, the cost of higher education in Texas is increasingly being shouldered by students, and if the University of Texas and Texas A&M have their way, that trend will accelerate, putting at risk the entire notion of public education.

The University of Texas System Board of Regents has made tuition deregulation its top legislative priority, and A&M administrators have also voiced their support for the idea. Deregulation would remove tuition caps currently in place and allow the regents at either school to raise tuition without approval from the state legislature.

A&M President Robert M. Gates has already imposed a 7 percent spending cut this year, and with a \$10 billion state budget deficit looming, further reductions in state funding are possible. The bleak fiscal situation facing public universities like A&M is real — without substantial increases in funding, A&M will fall behind and the goal of joining the nation's elite colleges will be only a pipedream. Lean times call for prioritizing, and Gates has appropriately vowed to spare academic programs from the impending cuts.

But in its quest to move up a few spots in the U.S. News and World Report rankings, the University must not forsake its central mission — to provide a quality education at a price Texans can afford. Deregulation would essentially privatize public universities — state legislators have even hinted that they would cut funding to schools which raised tuition. The net result would be the same amount of funding, but with students shouldering a larger share of the burden. The regents would be free to pursue institutional interests rather than the public interest. Legislators, unlike regents, are accountable to the voters and are more likely to ensure that tuition costs do not put a college education out of reach for disadvantaged and middle-class Texans.

The solution is more legislator involvement, not less. Many legislators have sworn the budget can be balanced without tax increases, but in reality, deregulation is a stealth tax hike on students and their families. Rather than shirking their responsibility, legislators must adequately fund higher education and reject any attempt to raise tuition.

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MAIL CALL

Class presidents respond to article

As the representatives of not only our classes, but also Class Councils, we would like to correct some of the information reported in Monday's article.

First, Class Councils is a self-supporting organization, raising money through events for our classes. It receives no student service fees.

Second, the Class Councils constitution, which gives the elected officers the authority to remove individuals from their respective councils, including elected officers, is approved in the general student body elections and was last amended this fall in the campus wide election. This election was open to voting for any student, including freshmen. A copy of the constitution was available for viewing then and is always available at our Web site. A Division of Student Affairs

staff member reviewed the removal process to ensure the constitution was within University guidelines and was followed.

Also, according to policies specifically outlined in the constitution, the proper authorities were kept informed prior to and during the deliberations and notified after the removal occurred.

Finally, because this was a performance related issue, the matter was reviewed and handled as a confidential personnel issue, specifically following guidelines described in the constitution and federal law.

Chris Durham
Class of 2003 President

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Clinton should not have passed up offer to be Oxford Chancellor

Some people collect normal material things like snow globes and shot glasses; others collect titles. For example, take William J. Clinton — governor of Arkansas, former president of the United States of America, and potential chancellor of Britain's famed University of Oxford.

In a recent poll published by Cherwell, the university's independent newspaper, 48 percent of 1,000 Oxford students who were polled favored Clinton as their top choice for new chancellor, a job he should have accepted. The job became available two weeks ago after the death of Roy Jenkins, who is a renowned figure in British politics and headed the university for 16 years, as reported in The Seattle Times.

Unfortunately, Clinton is "very busy with ... his foundation and this (the chancellor position) is not something he's considering," said spokeswoman Tammy Sun. In other words, our former president is too busy to assume one of the most prestigious roles in British academia. What happened to the opportunistic Clinton we knew? After all, that is the reason the British are so crazy about him.

If anyone deserves the chancellor position on the basis of merit and achievement, Clinton is the man for the job. When Americans think of Clinton, they tend to only remember the ole' boy for his well-publicized extramarital affair.

Everyone seems to forget that it was Clinton who made NAFTA (North

American Free Trade Agreement) a reality, signed the Jim Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act into law, was the first president to balance the budget since 1969, helped to bring the civil war in Bosnia to an end, and strived to mediate peace between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and the Palestinians and Israelis, even though the latter has seemed to violently fall apart.

"If anyone deserves the chancellor position on the basis of merit and achievement, Clinton is the man for the job."

With his worldly experience and charismatic savvy, Clinton could challenge a new generation of students to be better than the best — to become the next movers and shakers of our time. And being an Oxford man himself (he attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar from 1968-1970), he understands the goals and objectives of the university. But these achievements alone are not what makes him a great candidate for the Oxford chancellor-



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Melissa Fried is a sophomore international studies major.

