

Flu me once, shame on you; flu me twice, . . .

Jim Fetzer

When have you ever known Bush to talk at length about any remotely technical subject? Yet he did so about avian flu on Tuesday, 1 November 2005, and he has done so before. This strikes me as rather peculiar, since the flu has not mutated or evolved to the point that it is actually transmissible from human to human, which is a necessary condition for a "pandemic". So he is allocating—or at least recommending the allocation of—billions of dollars for a threat that does not yet exist. You might have thought, with this keen interest in science, he might have given more consideration to global warming before abrogating our commitments under the Kyoto Accords. Global warming, after all, is already here.

Not only might avian flu never exist, even if it comes to pass in the future, it may have already evolved to the point where the current vaccine is ineffectual. That sounds like something that we ought to be discussing. Viruses, like bacteria and other living things, continue to evolve. A vaccine developed based upon current species may be ineffectual against successor species. That means that billions of taxpayer dollars could be spent on stockpiling ineffectual vaccines. Surely I am not the only one who finds such a plan at least mildly misconceived.

It may be a cosmic coincidence, but the specific vaccine that Bush wants to buy, Tamiflu, is patented by a company that used to be headed by Donald Rumsfeld, who still owns vast amount of its stock. (See "Rumsfeld to Profit from Avian Flu Vaccine" by Nelson D. Schwartz, *Fortune*, Monday, 31 October 2005) . Bush is also suggesting that vaccine manufacturers should be immune (my word: ironic!) from liability, which is something they have long sought. Such a move dramatically

increases chances that manufacturers are going to cut corners and market unsafe products. Why not? They will then have nothing to lose and only greater profits to gain.

If this legislation passes, then the population of the United States will be turned into legal bio-guinea pigs for the benefit of the drug companies. But it must be OK. Bush tells us over and over again that his first responsibility as President of the country is to protect our safety and security. It's a gamble with our lives if the threat evolves and the vaccine turns out to be ineffectual. But it's a sure thing for the manufacturers, who not only stand to reap astronomical profits now but are going to be immune even if their vaccine should kill ever person with whom it happens to be injected--or, alternatively, if it should actually induce avian flu!

The New York Times ("Bush Announces Plan to Prepare for Avian Flu", Gardiner Harris, Wednesday, 2 November 2005, p. A25), reports the threat is serious since, "According to a draft of that plan, . . . , the nation is woefully ill prepared for a flu pandemic. Were one to occur, it says, hospitals would be overwhelmed, riots would engulf vaccination clinics, and even power and food would be in short supply." Insofar as the only persons to have been infected have been in close proximity to avian blood and feces, where transmission from human to human has yet to occur, this may strike some as a rather remote prospect. But not our President!

According to *The Times*, "The draft does not specify how troops might be used and who would be in charge under various circumstances—crucial decisions that bedeviled the response to Hurricane Katrina. Administration officials have said that such operational decisions will be made in the coming months through

cooperation among cabinet secretaries." This is the part that caught my eye. Notice the use of military troops (also known as "defense assets") will only hinge upon "cooperation among cabinet secretaries". Nothing is said about the need for legislation, for example, to override the Posse Comitatus Act, which precludes the use of federal forces for police functions within the United States.

Indeed, this is not the first time that Bush has promoted the idea that federal troops might be needed to cope with a natural disaster. In an earlier column, "With military aid response, Bush is again up to no good" (*Duluth News Tribune*, Thursday, 20 October 2005, p. 9A), I advanced the case for the deliberate abuse of FEMA to delay and deny assistance to victims of Hurricane Katrina in an effort to create the false impression that only the military is in the position to respond. The National Guard and FEMA are the entities rightly designated for these tasks, not federal troops. It was therefore extremely suspicious that the 82nd Airborne, trained to kill, was in New Orleans, while the Louisiana National Guard, trained to deal with hurricanes, was in Iraq. The pattern emerging here is rather frightening.

That appears to be the real reason Bush is placing such great emphasis upon an arcane subject about which he knows nothing. This is about gaining the legal right to send troops anywhere he wants for any reason he wants, especially in the case of some "crisis" that might vaguely justify suspending the Constitution and imposing martial law. That, I am afraid, is what all of this is about. It is serious, far more serious, in fact, than the threat that it is being advanced to combat. It is typical Bush, misleading us before our very eyes. He is planning to use our money to enslave us while enriching his friends. That's the plan.

"These are dark days in American history."—Charles Gessert

Others share similar opinions. On 2 November 2005, for example, Charles Gessert observed on the prog-action forum that Bush's proposals fit his past pattern of using national emergencies—real or not—to siphon billions of our nation's assets for the benefit of his friends. Gessert observes,

"His response to 9-11? Cut taxes, curtail environmental safeguards, and award multi-million-dollar contracts to the likes of Halliburton.

"His response to Katrina? Cut taxes, curtail environmental safeguards, send 'aid' to the oil industry, and award multi-million-dollar contracts to the likes of Halliburton.

"His response to influenza? Cut taxes, curtail environmental safeguards, and award billion-dollar contracts to his friends in the drug industry."

Gessert believes that the threat is real but that other steps need to be taken to cope with it, including (1) establishing a basis for international cooperation, (2) providing leadership in building support for the World Health Organization, (3) offering support for the United States' Public Health Service, (4) establishing an atmosphere of trust, so the public will have confidence in information that is provided by the administration, and (5) demonstrating your respect for science and scientific methods. These are all worthy means, no doubt, but many may wonder how Bush and his cronies could ever satisfy (4) and (5), given their past track record. His suggestions are good ones but are not likely to be ones that Bush would ever adopt.

Even more interesting to me than Gessert's sensible recommendations is his further observation that, almost in passing, the Bush team recently reported that, during the month of August, the President read a 546-page book on influenza. Gessert notes

that, read or unread, the book must be *The Great Influenza* by John M. Barry, which runs 546 pages including the index and notes. "Most of the book", Gessert reports, "is a paean to good scientific method. Bush clearly missed these parts. However, the book also includes a rather chilling description of how the Wilson administration censored the press and created a police state to assure that no public health measures would interfere with the US effort in WW I." Gessert suspects, and I agree, that it is these passages that drew the President's attention or that were pointed out to him.

That the threat from avian flu is being greatly exaggerated has been expressed by a growing chorus of experts. Gary Butcher, an extension veterinarian with a Ph.D. in poultry virology and who specializes in avian diseases, has been traveling around the country attempting to dispel myths about the danger they represent. According to Butcher ("Experts Dismiss Scare over Bird Flu" by Diane Chun, *The Gainesville Sun*, Tuesday, 1 November 2005), "Bird flu viruses have been around throughout history. What is unique about the (current) H5N1 strain is that, on rare occasions, it has shown the ability to infect humans. It is very inefficient, but it does manage", he observed.

Similar remarks have come from other expert sources. Dr. Marc Siegel, an associate professor of medicine at the NYU School of Medicine, expresses doubts about the extent of the threat. "If anything is contagious right now, it's judgment clouded by fear", he remarks. "Only once in every blue moon do you get infection in a poultry house, and the government has a system of monitoring and eradicating that means it is quickly wiped out", he said. "So it can happen, but it is rare and it is not allowed to spread." Additional sentiments of this kind have even appeared in our local paper ("Some suspect U.S. is getting overwrought about bird flu", by Kevin Freking, *Duluth News Tribune*, Sunday, 6 November 2005, p. 17A). The government has to know it.

Those opinions, of course, assume that nature is running its course and overlook the possibility of deliberate intervention by genetic engineering to create a strain that can be transmitted from human to human. That may sound extreme, but the Bush administration has fallen on hard times politically, between the indictment of the Vice President's Chief of Staff, Scooter Libby, the dismal failure of his nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, increasing divisions between Republicans of different stripes in the House, the legal problems of Tom DeLay and Bill Frist, and the ongoing investigation of Karl Rove, affectionately known as "Bush's brain".

His poll numbers are in free fall and his administration is in disarray. Desperate men take desperate measures. And I am not alone in holding that opinion. John M. Kelly ("Watch That Pea", mytown.ca/johnkelly/, Friday, 4 November 2005), has drawn the same conclusion. "If you think the last two elections have been a farce, what about no election because of a pandemic? What about the suspension of Congress and the prohibition of any public gathering enforced by the military? Maybe I'm just paranoid, but then again maybe anybody who believes that this administration is on the run hasn't been reading past the headlines." Indeed, as one of my dear friends likes to remind me, "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you!" That, alas, is the direction this wind is blowing.

Jim Fetzer, a professor of philosophy at UMD, believes that Bush desperately needs a pretext for suspending the Constitution and imposing martial law to extend his power as President, to benefit his rich friends, and to keep them all from prison.