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# Scientists warn nuclear catastrophe is ‘an imminent danger’

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Scientists gathered for a symposium held at Rockefeller University this week suggest that not enough is being done to address the threat of a terrorist attack with nuclear weapons.

In a talk titled “Our Last Best Chance” and timed to coincide with a new film of the same name airing on HBO this month, William J. Perry, a Stanford-trained mathematician who served as secretary of defense in Bill Clinton’s administration, cautions that current efforts to address the threat of nuclear attack are insufficient and in some cases misguided.

William J. Perry, former secretary of defense, addresses an audience gathered in Rockefeller's Caspary Auditorium.

“I believe we are moving inexorably to a nuclear catastrophe and nobody seems to be paying attention,” Perry said. “It is a real and imminent danger, and one acknowledged by the Bush administration. But the administration has not yet connected the dots between the danger they see and the actions they must take to deal with that danger.”

Perry’s talk was part of day-long symposium held in honor of Rockefeller University president emeritus Joshua Lederberg, a Nobel prize-winning biologist who has also held important advisory roles in government and served as scientific counselor to world leaders, including Perry, on issues ranging from cancer and emerging infectious diseases to space exploration and biological weapons disarmament. In addition to Perry’s talk, experts from several fields spoke on topics such as microbial drug resistance, exobiology and political challenges facing the Middle East.

Current efforts to control the nuclear threat mistakenly focus on two areas, Perry said. The first, the construction of a missile defense system, is irrelevant because nuclear devices are far more likely to arrive in a truck or container than on an intercontinental missile. And the second, interdiction of incoming cargo, has a low probability of success.

Instead, Perry suggests a three-pronged strategy to control the threat: increase the dismantling of existing nuclear weapons (a process that has slowed since the terrorist attack in September 2001), increase security around the existing arsenal of weapons and fissile material, and increase diplomatic efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear countries such as Iran and North Korea.

“Unfortunately, I share the bleakest view of the prospects that we face for the rest of this century,”

Lederberg said in comments he delivered following Perry's talk. "The ease of access to weaponry and the facility with which viruses and bacteria mutate and multiply are just two facets of my concern. Any of these is quite capable of shortening the lifetime of our civilization very substantially."

Lederberg, now 80, is University Professor and Raymond and Beverly Sackler Scholar and continues to head a laboratory at Rockefeller, which currently explores the ultimate limits governing the rate of bacterial growth.

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