

Book Reviews

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FLU: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus that Caused It,
Gina Kolata. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999.



The year 1918 has a uniqueness not associated with the successful ending of World War I. Human history is riddled with different kinds of plagues and disasters. Diseases caused some of them. The great and often unknown pandemic of 1918 killed an estimated 20 to 30 million people worldwide.

Few individuals die pleasantly, and those who died from this epidemic died most unpleasantly. A total of 500,000 Americans died during this time—15,000 in New York City alone. In Alaska, where the Eskimos were among the hardest hit, whole villages perished in just a few weeks. The stunned survivors could only bury the dead and try to get on with their lives.

Newspapers in the United States, in their usual search for the truth, stated that the Germans had loosed the plague on the United States through either Bayer Aspirin® (a German Company) or a camouflaged ship that entered the Boston harbor and spread the virus.

In many cities of the United States, people cut themselves off from any association with their friends and others. Why?—to avoid contracting the disease. Major parts of families were wiped out one by one. People were fearful and spent much time praying to God to deliver them from the disease.

To this day, no one knows what strain of flu caused the disease. If you enjoy mysteries—a search for the ultimate truth to the disease—then you’ve got to read *FLU: The Story of the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918 and the Search for the Virus that Caused It* by Gina Kolata, a science reporter for the *New York Times*. It is a well-written and well-researched book that reads like both an adventure novel and a mystery like those written by Agatha Christie.

This book begins with a snapshot of the effects of the disease and how it affected thousands of soldiers in camps all over the United States as well as cities and towns. Ms. Kolata leaves no doubt in the reader’s mind of the horrible

nature of the plague and takes no more than two chapters to tell this story. She doesn’t need to go into great detail because the story has fully been told in other books. The “guts” of the book is not the flu but the search for it.

The author shows how the plague suddenly stopped and never reoccurred. She introduces Dr. Johan V. Hultin from Sweden who later settled in the United States and became a very successful pathologist. As early as 1950, he conducted serious research to acquire fluid from the lungs of plague victims to possibly obtain strains of the live virus. He was unsuccessful.

Why? Dr. Hultin and others, such as Jeffrey Taubenberger who took up the search, wanted to map the genetic structure of one of the greatest killers of all time. Several scientists who performed in-depth studies of the 1918 disease believed that this flu killed about 40 million in India alone. The standard numbers for deaths attributed to the 1918 strain are in the range of 20 to 30 million. If new information about the 1918 flu is accurate, the true number of deaths could be much higher. If, for example, 40 million alone died in India, then the total deaths worldwide could number up to 100 million, which would make this the greatest killer of all time.

If the live virus could be found and mapped, then humankind would be protected if the virus returned again to plague this planet. That is why those people mentioned in the book have spent many years attempting to unlock the secrets of the 1918 flu.

Chapter 5 deals with the mid-1970’s flap over a particular strain of killer flu that broke out in and around Fort Dix, New Jersey. A number of physicians were afraid that the Fort Dix strain of flu was a potential repeat of the 1918 pandemic and that the nation could expect it to hit heavy the next flu season. Alarms went off to Washington, and President Gerald Ford interjected the government in the

fight when he tasked the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to develop a vaccine to immunize the entire nation. President Ford and his advisors had noble intentions, but a small problem arose. The vaccine had a tendency to trigger Guillain-Barre' Syndrome—a potentially fatal disease for some people.

After long and sometimes bitter debates, the government forged ahead with the vaccination program, and true to form, people died of the Guillain-Barre' Syndrome. This exposed the government to litigation, and a hurricane of suits hit the government—no doubt pleasing the Trial Lawyers Association. In the final few chapters, the author summarizes what we know about the disease and recent attempts to discover the live tissue in the corpses of long-deceased individuals. We now have live strains of the disease, but so far, science cannot map it accurately enough to chart its genetic structure. Some of the best scientific minds in the world have attempted to not only chart the disease but also to understand how it spread so far so fast.

The important reason for reading this excellent book can be found in the ending sentences:

"Perhaps we grow almost smug about influenza, that most quotidian of infections, a new plague is now gathering deadly force. Except this time we stand armed with a better understanding of the past to better survive the next pandemic."

This, if nothing else, should cause concern about the possibilities of the flu. We cannot be overconfident. We could become a reincarnation of the 1918 flu, which could devastate the United States and not destroy a single man-made object. Small towns could be intact, but deserted. It happened once, and it can happen again.

Saddam's Secrets: The Hunt for Iraq's Hidden Weapons.

Tim Trevan. New York: Harper, Collins, 1999

At the end of the Gulf War, it was assumed that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) had been destroyed. The final authority laid in the hands of the UN inspectors whose task was to ensure that all Iraq's WMD were completely destroyed. However, Saddam Hussein had other ideas. To keep his WMD, Saddam was willing to let the people of Iraq suffer considerably because of UN sanctions. All Iraq had to do was to comply with UN resolutions and, once the WMD had been eliminated, the sanctions would have been lifted.

Since 1991, the Iraqis have continued to be defiant and less than truthful in their contacts with the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), the WMD inspection arm of the United Nations. For an inside look at the "cat-and-mouse" game between the United Nations and Iraq over its WMD infrastructure, read Tim Trevan's *Saddam's Secrets: The Hunt For Iraq's Hidden Weapons*.

Mr. Trevan's book is not objective nor is it intended to be an exhaustive academic history of the UNSCOM. Trevan was there in the middle of all Iraq's lies, deceit, and obstruction aimed against the United Nations for nearly a decade. He writes from personal experience and, in the wording of the text, it is obvious that he, as well as the UNSCOM, was very frustrated. They were trying to do their job. Iraq, however, was not cooperating and was also going to considerable lengths to stop the teams from finding what they needed to get the job done.

In one case, a UNSCOM team happened onto a large archive of documents that it wanted to remove from the parking lot of a building. For four days, there was a standoff between the unarmed team and hundreds of heavily armed Iraqi soldiers. Trevan's time in Baghdad was often punctuated by US air raids to encourage Iraq to cooperate. Eventually Iraq did agree to cooperate and went into the mode made popular at the time—"cheat and retreat."

This book is important for one chilling reason—if counterproliferation operations are to rid the world of WMD, it will be much harder to do that now because Iraq has shown that if a nation or, in this case, an absolute leader wants to defy the United Nations and the United States and is willing to take the heat, there is not much either can do short of a direct invasion.

Saddam's Secrets is a primer for any state that develops WMD and stands up to outside pressure to retain that capability. Both India and Pakistan have WMD. Neither is as militarily weak as Iraq, but both would go to any length to retain their WMD programs. They have spent too much money, time, and effort to develop them; thus, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to persuade them to stop. Pressure like that applied against Saddam would not work. Both nations would be willing to undergo privations to keep their WMD.

If counterproliferation is to work, Saddam must comply, and *Saddam's Secrets* shows that is next to impossible. He will fight to the last Iraqi to retain his WMD because that is what he thinks. Iraq is surrounded by countries Saddam perceives as threats (such as Syria, Iran, and Israel), and having WMD capability preserves Iraq's and, of course, Saddam's position.

In reading this book, one can truly appreciate the hard work and dedication of UNSCOM's teams and the genuine risks they took to attempt to complete what Iraq had originally agreed to do with U.S. and Allied forces with a clear road to Baghdad.

You should read this book; it is a precursor of things to come. There can be no doubt that other rogue states will take heart from Iraq's defiance and continue to make and test WMD. The world will not be the better for it.