

Film Review

Outbreak

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Synopsis:

**The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet is a virus.”
—Joshua Lederberg, Nobel laureate**

This quote opens the movie and provides the theme for the movie, which is essentially the rights of the few versus the good of the many.

The film opens in Motaba River Valley, Zaire in 1967 where a deadly hemorrhagic fever has savagely attacked a mercenary camp. United States Generals McClintock and Ford, in order to keep the virus a secret, use a bomb to wipe out the camp.

Cut to the mid-90's. Motaba Virus has struck again in Africa. Colonel Sam Daniels (Dustin Hoffman) of USAMRIID, who has no idea Motaba Virus even exists, is sent to investigate with his crew which includes Major Kasey Schuler (Kevin Spacey), his friend and experienced military doctor/virologist, and Major Salt (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), a confident rookie who Kasey tries to shake up by describing the effects of hemorrhagic fever. The men arrive in Motaba River Valley, Zaire and see the destruction that Motaba Virus has wrought upon a village. Major Salt, despite his declarations that he could handle seeing hemorrhagic fever in person, begins to panic at the sight of the victims and has to remove his mask in order to vomit. Luckily, a man appears and tells Sam that the virus is not airborne but was spread through well water. The man also tells Sam that the disease kills in a few days and the mortality rate is 100%. On the plane back, Sam says that although the disease is contained it is the “scariest son of a _____ he has ever seen.”

Sam tries to get his commander General Ford to issue an alert. Ford refuses to issue an alert. Ford justifies his decision to Sam by saying that it kills too quickly for people to spread it around. Ford was involved in the '67 outbreak in Zaire, and thus has other motivations than those he represented to Sam in not ordering the alert.

General Ford could not be more wrong as a monkey from Africa, the host of Motaba Virus, is in the United States and outbreaks occur in Boston and Cedar Creek, California. While the Boston outbreak is contained, a horrible outbreak occurs in Cedar Creek because the Cedar Creek virus is airborne (the theory being not that the virus mutated but that the host carries both viruses).

Sam, Kasey, Salt, and Robby (Sam's ex-wife, a doctor with the CDC) desperately try to find the host animal so that they can find a cure. In the process, Kasey and Robby become infected. Sam and Salt eventually find the host but later discover that the U.S. military is not concerned with saving Cedar Creek, they are concerned with saving a powerful biological weapon and the military has already convinced the President to bomb Cedar Creek (Operation Clean Sweep) as they did in Africa 30 years ago. The military has not told the President about the anti-serum, and he assumes that the bombing is necessary to prevent millions of deaths from the spread of this disease.

Sam must stop the bombing of Cedar Creek so he can save his ex-wife, whom he still loves, and the citizens of Cedar Creek.

Review:

This film was an excellent illustration of how the social compact theory might apply if a deadly infectious disease like Motaba was to affect the United States.

I think that many lay persons not acquainted with constitutional law and the social compact theory might find this film unrealistic. There is a scene where some Cedar Creek citizens try to escape the town in their vehicles, and one (the car that shoots at the helicopter) is shot by military helicopters. Most people assume that the military cannot do that, that citizens have rights. What most people do not realize is that something like that is entirely possible if not probable in a situation like the one in this movie. Here the conduct of the military was probably justified, the fleeing citizens were posing an identified actual threat to the public health of America, and it was clear that the citizens in the car that was shooting were not going to stop, but were going to force their way out and the measures taken by the military were necessary. On the other hand, this scene illustrates the potential result of military-law enforcement among civilians.

Clean Sweep is a different story. At the beginning of the movie, Sam said that the virus has a short incubation period and if people do not get sick within 24 hours then they will not get sick. The film made it look as if days passed between the Cedar Creek outbreak and the time that the military was going to initiate Clean Sweep. If anyone had gotten out, then the government would have probably known, as the nation was on high alert. It seemed unnecessary to bomb the town for public health reasons (which is why the President thought he was doing it) because clearly the virus was contained. Thus, Clean Sweep would not have been justified under the Social Compact theory because it was not reasonable under the circumstances.

Another interesting part of the movie pertaining to Clean Sweep was the White House discussion. One of the men speaking points out that the U.S. constitution says nothing about bombing cities, but it does mention that you cannot deprive people of life, liberty, or property without due process. He tells the people sitting around the table that there must be unanimous

support for the President, illustrating that they know that although they can bomb Cedar Creek, that there will be massive political repercussions.

The United States has never experienced a viral agent with quite the capabilities as the fictional Motaba Virus. This country has seen some dangerous epidemics such as flu and plague, but nothing that would ravage this country as quickly as Motaba. This movie was a great illustration of the tension between wanting to save the individual, and the duty to protect the public.

From a health/science perspective, this film was realistic in that it showed how quickly a highly contagious virus could spread. However, there were some questionable aspects of the Motaba Virus. For example, I had difficulty understanding the monkey carrying both strains. Why did Jimbo Scott (the man who smuggled the host monkey out of the animal holding facility) get one strain and Rudy (the pet shop owner Jimbo tried to sell the monkey to) get the other. That part seemed a bit disjointed and unexplained.

It was interesting the way the movie showed Henry (a lab technician who was sprayed with Rudy's blood and infected) coughing and the microscopic droplets coming out of his mouth, which symbolized the virus spreading. Also, the way the camera panned through the vents of the hospital in Cedar Creek to show how the virus was spreading through the air. In addition, the make-up in this movie was fantastic; you really believe these infected people were dying of a deadly virus.

This movie was also a good illustration of how biodefense can come into play with highly infectious and lethal diseases. One of the justifications for Clean Sweep was that the U.S. had to protect itself against other countries developing bioweapons. While General McClintock (Donald Sutherland), the man heading up Clean Sweep, is very easy to dislike, you must also

keep in mind that he is thinking in terms of the greater good for America. He only wants to keep this weapon to protect our country, but then you must also remember that America renounced biological warfare during the Nixon era. It suggests that remnants of the former offensive program in biological weapons development may still linger in the vault of the Pentagon, and that staff from that era may still believe in the value of that long ago-ended program.

This film, while unrealistic in some ways, was effective in showing us that extreme measures can be considered if a virus like Motaba was ever to show up in the United States. From a health and science perspective, I felt this film, for the most part, accurately portrayed the spread of infectious disease. This film was also good for getting people to think about the consequences of engaging in biological warfare. I gave the movie three scales of justice for its portrayal of legal concepts and 4 biohazard symbols for its portrayal of scientific/biodefense concepts.

