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Sticking Point; Why Am I Resisting the Vaccine? The Military Trained Me To

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For almost 17 years--as an Air Force Academy cadet, an officer and fighter pilot, and now a reservist--I have been a loyal member of the U.S. military. Yet today, along with many other service members and members of Congress, I find myself challenging the Pentagon's anthrax vaccine program. Some will see my act as one of disloyalty. It is not. My loyalty is to a military institution of integrity, not to policies that lack integrity. As the Pentagon digs in to protect a policy under fire, debating this issue outside military channels is my only recourse.

A year ago, as part of the program to inoculate all service members against anthrax, I was asked to roll up my sleeve and take the first of six shots. And like hundreds of other service members, I said "no"--in my case, because of unanswered questions about the vaccine's safety. Because of that decision, I am a fighter pilot who no longer flies. I was ordered to resign as a member of the Connecticut Air National Guard and was transferred to a desk job within the reserves. Regardless, I continue to speak out about the possible dangers of the vaccine policy, fight to reverse this dishonorable policy and seek redress for service members affected by it.

Our increased awareness of the dangers troops face from terrorism is a backdrop to the anthrax vaccine policy. In 1996, 19 Air Force personnel were killed and more than 500 others injured in a terrorist bombing of the Khobar Towers at a U.S. military housing complex in Saudi Arabia. With that, the rhetoric of "force protection" began driving military operations. As part of this, protecting against biological threats, including anthrax, became a priority. Thus, I was not surprised when, in December 1997, the military decided to inoculate the problem away. I watched on television as political appointees in the Defense Department rolled up their sleeves for the cameras--leading by example and accepting the vaccine--and I thought, these gentlemen will never have to test the vaccine's effectiveness in combat.

The anthrax vaccine seemed to provide Pentagon leaders with a quick fix to a complex problem. But it assumed that our adversaries would fight us with the sole biological agent we were being protected against. This is absurd. And it assumed that all service members everywhere would be in need of such protection. Troops who had never before refused orders began resisting the vaccine. Some were concerned that the military, by implying that it could protect troops from one biological agent--anthrax--could ultimately leave our forces more vulnerable to myriad other biological agents. Others knew that the vaccine was approved by the FDA for limited use by veterinarians, not against biological warfare. Still others knew that some service members who had received the vaccine during the Persian Gulf War suspected that it had caused them unresolved medical problems. I could not understand why the military was moving ahead so quickly despite the unresolved controversies.

In May 1998, the Pentagon mandated that all service members, both active and reserve, would receive the anthrax vaccine over time. That summer, I left the full-time force for reserve duty in my home state of Connecticut. Safety concerns about the vaccine overshadowed operations in my new unit. My commander directed members of my unit to research these concerns, and said he would present them to the commander of the Air National Guard. Through that research, we uncovered a stark dichotomy between what our military leaders claimed and the information readily available in medical literature and FDA inspection reports.

Descriptions of the vaccine by the military's own medical experts were disturbing. Col. Arthur Friedlander, a chief Army biological researcher, had written in 1994 in the textbook "Vaccines" that "the current vaccine against anthrax is unsatisfactory." A report that same year by the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee quoted Gen. Ronald Blanck, who is now the Army surgeon general, as saying that the "anthrax vaccine should continue to be considered as a potential cause for undiagnosed illnesses in Persian Gulf military personnel."

Equally alarming, in February 1998, the only U.S. company that manufactures the anthrax vaccine had failed an FDA inspection of its production line. The FDA cited vaccine sterility and potency deviations. (Late last year, the company failed another inspection. Again, the FDA cited sterility and potency deviations.) We reported our findings and questions to our commanders, fully expecting that they would be answered, as he had promised.

We were further concerned by FDA inspection reports that identified microbial contamination in some of the vaccine. We asked a commander for supplemental testing data. But the Pentagon instead handed over only production testing data from 1996--two years before the first failed FDA inspection. Soon after, a commander told us that our questions would not be answered and that we should transfer if we could not submit to the vaccine.

I was outraged. For 16 years we had been given safety and ethics training. We had been taught to recognize, question and refuse illegal or immoral orders if necessary. Now, our questions were dismissed outright. We were asked to leave quickly and quietly. As a result, in January 1999, eight pilots--about a quarter of the 103rd Fighter Wing--resigned from the Connecticut Air National Guard. Most of us transferred to desk duty in the Air Force Reserves. I was further dismayed as our resignations were misrepresented at Pentagon media briefings. A spokesman suggested that some of us had left for family and personal reasons and implied that we had refused the vaccine because we were unwilling to deploy overseas.

Over the past year, our concerns have been validated by eight congressional hearings, multiple General Accounting Office reports, three bills pending before Congress, and the second failed FDA inspection at the manufacturing plant--all of which point to safety concerns.

Before the inoculations began, Defense Secretary William Cohen had mandated four prerequisites for the policy, including supplemental testing and an independent expert review. But the Defense Department halted the supplemental testing of the vaccine stockpile in the fall of 1998. And the expert asked by the Pentagon to review the policy, a gynecologist from Yale University, acknowledged in a letter to the House Government Reform and Oversight subcommittee on national security that he had "no expertise in anthrax." Six members of Congress later charged that none of Cohen's prerequisites had been addressed satisfactorily. In defending the program, senior Pentagon officials have pointed to a growing biological threat to the troops, yet the General Accounting Office has concluded, based on military intelligence data, that the nature and magnitude of the biological warfare threat have not changed since 1990.

My wife has backed me up throughout this ordeal. But she also has made clear that if I bailed out over this vaccine I must make sure others would not have to do the same in the future. She has reminded me that every step I take in this journey provides an example for our children, who we still hope will serve in the armed forces one day. For their sake, and for the sake of the young people I recruit for the Air Force Academy, I will stay the course until the anthrax vaccine policy is reversed.

Last year, at a congressional hearing, Rep. Mark Edward Souder (R- Ind.) accused the Defense Department of choosing to protect its policy rather than the troops. I agree, and I have concluded that the vaccine is no longer about force protection; it is merely a biological loyalty oath. In rejecting this test of fealty, I have affirmed my duty to challenge orders that don't stand up to a critical and honest analysis.

In time of war, my duty is to defend our nation's liberties and interests--with my life if necessary. But in peacetime it is also my duty to let my chain of command know when something doesn't pass the common-sense test. As military leaders employ courts-martial and even imprisonment to enforce this questionable policy, a contagious group think at the highest levels has equated critical thinking with a lack of good order and discipline. Indeed, a fellow officer, Maj. Sonnie Bates, who testified before Congress regarding these concerns, now faces court-martial. This violates what, for me, defines America's military: honesty, loyalty both up and down the chain of command, and a duty not to blindly follow questionable orders.

While service members must sacrifice personal freedoms, they entrust certain rights, such as their safety, to their commanders. But soldiers are citizens first; Congress has the responsibility to provide oversight if the Defense Department is not looking out for the troops' rights. Congress is doing its duty.

As noted Harvard scholar Samuel Huntington observed, our professional standards justify disobedience when a military leader is ordered to take a measure that is militarily absurd. Those professional standards are spelled out in our honor code and oath of office.

So when a senior military leader recently said to me, "Perhaps if you don't trust the military anymore, you need to hang up your uniform," I didn't hesitate to respond, "With due respect, sir, my duty is to be a member of a military that is trustworthy."

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