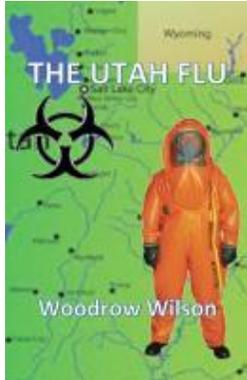


THE UTAH FLU



Woodrow Wilson



Lethal and antibiotic-resistant, a new disease is spreading across the country. The death toll is climbing. The Centers for Disease Control must act before it becomes epidemic. The data say it started in Utah! Could it have escaped from biological weapons abandoned there fifty years ago? The Army swears it couldn't be theirs. Could this be a bioengineered weapon? Could this be a bio-terrorist attack?

The Utah Flu

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You free excerpt follows. Enjoy.

THE UTAH FLU

Woodrow Wilson

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Also by Woodrow Wilson

**THE CHAMPAGNE TASTE/BEER BUDGET
COOKBOOK**

DEAD ASTRONAUTS

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of my late wife,
Marion McGee Wilson, RN
a healer all her life.

CHAPTER 1

“An anthrax alarm isn’t in our mission statement.” Owen Cole folded his arms across his chest. “We compile statistics on major diseases, that’s all.”

Jack Reagan glared at him. A great gargoyle of a man, the harsh light of the projector emphasized his angular features. “It probably seemed pretty major to these people—they died of it.” He poked one number among dozens projected on the screen. “Forty-seven cases may not sound like much, but they’re forty-seven fatalities—from a rare disease—in one month. We should alert—“

“Just wrap up your numbers on the flu season, and leave health care management to the Epidemiology Program Office,” Owen asserted his rank. “EPO wouldn’t listen to you anyway; they’re doctors, you’re just another computer nerd.”

“They’re doctors and they won’t notice this until it’s as big as a barn.” The Centers for Disease Control logo warped around his Buddha belly as Jack stepped into the projector beam. “Mining the Center’s databases exposed some anomalies. This provides an early warning for the doctors. That’s what medical statistics is all about. With all due respect, Sir: that is our mission!” The dozen figures around the conference table sat up straighter; Jack knew they all agreed but they’d rather not get involved.

“All right, calm down and take a minute to tell us about it, then can we please get back on task?”

Jack stepped back from the spotlight. “The monthly mortality and morbidity data showed some curious trends in deaths following colds and flu. There were an unusual number of younger victims. I isolated their files and found they shared atypical symptoms—the symptoms of pulmonary anthrax, not the normal sequelae of the common cold—”

“and you want to spread an alarm based on that!” Owen objected. “Jack, people don’t get anthrax in this country.”

“We think people don’t get anthrax, but I’ve got forty-seven people who might not agree. That’s what makes this so urgent: we have a new lethal outbreak. Call anthrax a hypothesis, but I need to dig deeper into the data to be sure.”

“Well, don’t do it on company time. Now could we get back to work; I have to meet with the Director in an hour.”

Jack clicked to the next slide and droned the rest of a presentation as dull as another page of numbers. Hard to believe so much ignorance could be packed into a single man, he thought. Probably played too much football without his helmet. Right after lunch, Jack would get back to his anthrax data. Two could play the tenured Civil Servant game as well as one; he’d do it and apologize later. Maybe they’ll promote

Owen up out of harm's way again, he hoped—then Jack can do what they paid him to do.

Jack watched Owen Cole slide his watch out of his vest pocket and flip it open. He snapped it shut, got up and walked out. Ten of, the clock on the back wall said. Owen probably wants to fix his hair before his important meeting. Hell, he's got less to comb than I do, Jack thought. He doesn't need ten minutes: what will he do for the other nine? Jack could rush through the rest of his report and get this meeting over on schedule.

"Idiot," Jack threw the bag of potato chips from the machine on his desk. He reached for the Mason jar in the back of the file drawer and poured himself a shot. Its astringent smell bit his nostrils—this was the good stuff. He'd picked it up from a 'shiner over in Tullahoma the last time he'd been home.

"Civil Service," he lifted his glass, "raising incompetence to an art form—promoting idiots like Owen in its own defense."

Jack took a sip of lunch. He nudged the mouse and woke the computer sleeping on his desk. Its stirring drowned out the crackling of the potato chip bag. White lightning's turpentine taste overpowered the essence of barbecue sauce. Jack nibbled while he waited for the machine to settle down.

Numbers-R-Us, he typed his password and waited some more. He wadded the empty bag into a ball and tossed it at the wastebasket across the room. "Two points!"

Time to get serious, he decided. He rubbed potato chip debris off his hands and reached for his computer. A few clicks brought him to the database manager, ready to take up where he had left off the night before. Forty-seven suspicious deaths: victims under sixty died after recovering from colds or flu. All had experienced acute respiratory distress followed by heart attack and shock. Death had occurred within seventy-two

hours. Jack clicked the *Analyze New Data* icon—fifty-three suspicious deaths.

“Six more died yesterday!”

He activated *Find Similar* from a pull-down menu. A new screen popped up, *Rank Symptoms* it requested. Jack proceeded down the list of questions. Cold or flu might be underreported, so he rated it a maybe. The pulmonary distress is severe: he ranked it crucial. The reports had labeled it pneumonia, bronchitis and tuberculosis, so he couldn't be more specific. Classify cardiac arrest important but not essential—he didn't want to eliminate those who had died of the other symptoms first. *Fatality* the computer inquired. “Yeah, let's come back to nonfatal infections later.” He relaxed the age limits and clicked *Okay*.

A whirling beachball replaced the cursor, then gave way to a new message window. *Fuzzy searches are computer intensive*, it warned. *Estimated search time is greater than four hours. Suggest you refine your search.*

Jack selected the delay option instead and specified execution at 22:00. “There, is that after-hours enough for you Owen?” He could work with the fifty-three files he'd isolated already until the next day.

Capture symptoms, Jack directed the computer. Respiratory distress began a few days after recovery from a cold with fever; breathing was reported painful or obstructed. Oxygen treatment eased breathing and reduced blue coloration of patient skin. Progress of the disease was arrested for forty-eight to seventy-two hours under various antibiotic regimes. Subsequent shock or heart attack was fatal. *Diagnose*, he ordered his computer. It responded that pulmonary anthrax was the most likely cause; other diseases were possible but less probable.

“Damn, where did this crap come from?” he mumbled. The victims were scattered across the country: New York, Chicago, Salt Lake, southern California and a smattering in between. “Nothing there,” he shook his head at the computer map. “It tracks population.

“What did they do?” A little of this and a little of that, the computer indicated: a dozen business and sales people, a few GIs, three flight attendants, a couple of waiters, a scattering of housewives and school children, and a potpourri of other professions. “Nothing—these people had nothing in common.”

There had to be something there; there always was. He’d read the files one more time.

An urgent message icon blinked on the screen. He clicked and it opened. *E-mail tickler from Jack Reagan*, the message began. *This is the third anniversary of the end of alimony. Flowers would prevent a recurrence.*

“Oh shit! I’d best get on that,” he reacted. He remembered when he had married Betty again. The first time, Betty had caught him with his pants down and won big in divorce court. She had come home a day early and found him with Carol. That one-night stand had cost him; this time he’d be more careful.

He had never recovered from the divorce. Homely nerds didn’t attract a lot of dates, and the poverty of alimony only made matters worse. Even his move to Atlanta hadn’t helped. He loved his children and vacationed with them and their mother while they grew up. After the children were gone, Betty let Jack back in her life. The kids were delighted when their father stayed at the house over Winter Break; he and Betty got engaged during a spring week in the Bahamas. Three years ago that day, Jack had remarried his bride.

Jack remembered the roast the office had thrown for that one. His staff awarded him the “Recycler of the Year” plaque

mounted behind his desk. They chided him about blowing a perfectly good tax deduction. They accused him of marrying her for money—his own money.

Owen Cole had tried to poop that party. He pronounced the entire affair inappropriate and unprofessional. Owen fretted about drinking on government property and the Center's liability if anyone had an accident on the way home. Was the punch spiked with lab alcohol? Who was going to clean up after it was over?

Jack had almost choked when Owen claimed he drank only in moderation. He had dribbled hard watermelon over his chin and down his shirt. "Yeah right, that's how I remember all you fraternity jocks back at Tennessee." The comment had fallen out of his mouth louder than he had planned. Owen glared at him and walked out.

For his third anniversary, Jack awarded himself the rest of the afternoon off. He'd pick up a dozen roses—an ounce of prevention—and a bottle of champagne on his way home. The kids were away; he and Betty would have the evening to themselves. He rationalized that there wasn't much he could do until the computer delivered the new data in the morning.

Three hundred and twenty-three similar deaths waited in Jack's queue in the morning. "That's ugly," he cursed, "let's get a cup of coffee and leap into action here." He clicked a few icons and left the computer churning while he went to the coffee station down the hall.

That sounded like too many cases. Jack assumed he had screwed up the search parameters somehow. He sipped his coffee while he spot-checked the first few files to find his mistake.

- Israel Martinez, 34, had died in a San Diego traffic accident. "What the hell?" Jack wondered how the

computer had picked his file. He reread it. Contributing factors: walking pneumonia and heart attack. “Okay, damn this is thorough.”

- Antibiotic-resistant tuberculosis was listed as the cause of death for Meg Shaw, a twenty-eight year old flight attendant from Queens, New York. Her records indicated she had had a cold.
- Nineteen-year-old Army Corporal Nathan Boggs had suffered a heart attack during treatment for acute respiratory distress in a Utah infirmary. There were no prior reports of cold or flu symptoms.

“Okay, maybe. They’re close enough for government work; let’s see.” He selected *Compile Symptoms* from the Statistics menu; a list of conditions and percentages flashed up on the screen. *Diagnose* he directed his computer. Pulmonary anthrax still led the list of candidates, but with a lower confidence index. “Looks similar.”

Similarity or serendipity, Jack wondered. He brought up the old file of suspicious deaths and told the computer to display it with the new results. The old data, indicated in red, started early in the month and increased erratically. The black dots showing the new data started about the same time and climbed more consistently. Jack clicked on an outlying point. An overdose of Ecstasy had contributed to Jerome Kail’s acute respiratory distress and subsequent death. He instructed the computer to disregard that datum and selected another remote point. Carmen La Belle was a chemotherapy outpatient when she went into shock. Jack culled the questionable files, and the data coalesced toward a smooth curve.

“Looks better to me,” Jack concluded. “What do you think, computer?” He selected *Compare Distributions* from the statistics menu and let the machine grind while he went for another cup of coffee.

The two data sets appear to have been drawn from the same distribution, it reported when he returned.

Jack merged the two files. Maybe the timeline looked a little ratty at the beginning, but it smoothed out later. The problem looked real. Three hundred and sixty-four suspected anthrax deaths should be enough to get even Owen off the dime!

The data mapped into a gray smudge across the country with black lesions marking the population centers. It was less noisy than the old data, but still no pattern leapt off the screen at him. Jack propped his feet up on his desk and stared at the screen. He continued staring into the glow of his monitor after the motion sensor turned his office lights out.

“Ah!” he swung his feet off the desk and reached for his mouse. *Map History* he ordered the computer. It responded with a legend: a spectrum running from red for the earliest deaths to violet for the most recent.

His “You son of a bitch!” rang up and down the hallways. “You God-damned son of a bitch!” The swath across the country had shifted from gray to a nondescript purple-brown blur, except for one spot—Salt Lake City glowed red with a yellow halo.

People poured in from neighboring offices asking concerned questions like “What happened, Jack?” and “Are you okay?”

“Look at that!” he jabbed the monitor. “Do you see that!”

“What are we looking at?” someone asked.

“Anthrax.”

“You’re not supposed to be working on anthrax,” Owen barked from the rear of the crowd. He sounded grumpy; Jack’s outburst must have interrupted his nap. “You’re supposed to be working on diseases humans catch, American humans.”

“They get anthrax now. I’ve found three hundred and sixty-four domestic fatalities to date.”

“Have you found how many work days were lost to the flu? Those numbers are on the critical path for the Quarterly Report. How soon can we have them?”

“The computer is cranking the numbers right now,” Jack lied. “I can’t start double checking the results before it’s done. Until then, I have time to research this anthrax problem.”

“Would you prefer I spend the time playing Solitaire or surfing the web, Owen?” Jack swallowed the rest of his sentence and looked Owen straight in the eye. Owen looked away.

Jack returned his attention to the others. “Look at that! – That’s the timeline for pulmonary anthrax deaths this month. There are a lot of them spread all over the place, but look at the map. This thing started in Utah.”

“What’s in Utah?” someone asked.

“Sheep,” someone else answered him.

“Sheep, yes,” Jack agreed, “sheep and the Army.”

CHAPTER 2

“**H**as the Army had an anthrax release, Colonel?” Jack Reagan asked point blank. He realized his phone-side manner could use a little work.

Jack sipped his coffee and waited through a buzz of typing on the line. “The United States has no stocks of anthrax or other biological warfare materiel,” Lieutenant Colonel Uma Hees answered without intonation. She seemed to be reciting the party line.

“The Russians didn’t have any at Sventlosk either,” Jack ridiculed her rote response.

“Is such a provocative comment really appropriate?” She sounded defensive.

“Yes, our data show a surge in pulmonary anthrax fatalities—“

“Doctor, anthrax is not a communicable disease.”

“Natural anthrax isn’t, but how about weapon anthrax? What has genetic engineering achieved?”

“Anthrax is an obscure disease, Doctor. On what pathology do you base your diagnosis?”

“The patients suffer acute respiratory distress days after recovering from cold or flu symptoms. They don’t respond to the usual antibiotic regimens; instead they slip into shock or cardiac arrest.”

“Sounds like strep to me. What do you see in the cultures—streptococci or *Bacillus anthracis*?”

“We don’t have culture data.”

“If you didn’t take cultures, how did you make your diagnosis, Doctor?” she scoffed.

“I didn’t diagnose it, the computer did—”

“and you believed it!” she sounded incredulous.

She put him on hold—at least she hadn’t hung up. Colonel Hees returned. “Security’s phone trace confirms you as John Paul Reagan, Ph.D. with the Centers for Disease Control’s Division of Medical Statistics.

“I guess a computer geek might believe a computer diagnosis,” she sneered. “Have any humans reviewed the computer’s analysis?”

“Just me, so far.”

“And you believe it? –Why?”

“Experience, the data feels right. I haven’t finished the epicenter calculations, but I can eyeball the answer. This started around Salt Lake City. That’s what led to my question.”

“I understand your concerns,” Uma said, “but I doubt your diagnosis. Can you e-mail me the medical records so I can examine them?”

“You want all of them?”

“What does ‘all of them’ mean? How many are there?”

“I have three hundred and seventy-nine fatalities through last night.”

“That many? Really? Where?”

“They’re all over—a lot around Salt Lake City, but it’s spread to New York, Chicago, and Southern California.”

“You do seem to be onto a problem. It can’t be anthrax. Anthrax is not contagious. Even the Sventlosk accident didn’t spread.”

“Yeah, the Russians quarantined the town and let the whole population die,” Jack objected. “Our bug has escaped.”

“Your bug can’t be anthrax. Send me a few files. I’m sure the Commander won’t mind if I look them over and identify the actual culprit.”

Hers was the best offer he’d had all day. Jack promised to send representative files within the hour. He’d select the most convincing ones, then got back to Owen’s flu numbers.

The phone was already ringing when he walked into his office the next morning. He punched the speakerphone button and answered “Yes” as he pushed stacks of paper aside to make room for more.

“Dr. Reagan, this is Lieutenant Colonel Uma Hees from the Army Medical Research and Development Command in Edgewood, Maryland. We spoke yesterday,” a tinny voice responded.

“Yes, Lieutenant, I recall—“

“That’s Colonel!”

“I’m sorry, Colonel. This is Jack Reagan.”

“Take me off the box, Doctor.”

Jack picked up the receiver, “Yes, I recall. Did you receive my e-mail with the attachments?”

“Yes, I reviewed them briefly. There seems to be a superficial resemblance between this syndrome and pulmonary

anthrax; however, neither the Commander nor I find your conclusion justified,” she informed him.

“The Army has a history of cooperating with the public health services. My Commander takes pride in that tradition. He directed me to invite you to bring us your full data package.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Would Monday be too soon?”

“I’m scheduled to brief him at seventeen hundred tomorrow.” There was a direct order in her tone.

“Tomorrow is Saturday—“

“What’s your point?”

“I’ll hop the first plane to Washington in the morning. Can you send me directions to Walter Reed?”

“My office is in the Institute for Biological Defense in Edgewood, Maryland.”

“Oh, I thought you were Army Medical—“

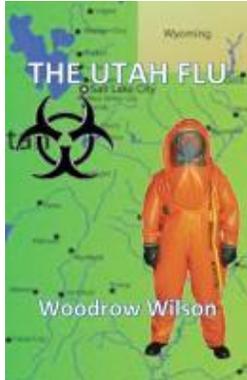
“I am. We’re not all at Walter Reed. Take that first plane to Baltimore. GPS should get you to the gate. The guard who checks you in will direct you to the building.”

“I’ll be there at the crack of dawn with my laptop loaded for bear.”

“Park your laptop and your phone in the car. I’d put the data on a thumb drive if I were you. They’re squirrely about recording devices here; they won’t let computers, discs or drives leave the building.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, by the way,” she paused. “The word anthrax shouldn’t appear in your travel orders.”



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