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2:51 PM, Nov 15, 2013

UNDATED (USA Today) - Decades after it stopped using the animal-borne virus that causes the disease Q fever as a biological weapon, the Pentagon is still trying to develop a vaccine to protect troops from the highly infectious disease.

Called a class B bioterrorism agent by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Q fever is carried mostly by sheep and goats and travels by air. U.S. troops fighting in Iraq returned home with the disease, military medical reports show.

The United States stopped its chemical and biological weapons program in 1969. According to the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), which is leading the search for a vaccine, the United States "weaponized" *Coxiella burnetii*, the virus that causes Q fever.

DTRA will conduct a seminar in December for potential researchers seeking a cure, documents released this week show.

First described in Australia in 1937, Q fever occurs worldwide and "has long been considered an underreported and underdiagnosed illness because symptoms frequently are non-specific, making diagnosis challenging," a March 2013 CDC paper shows.

Most cases of the fever are not fatal. In weapons, they have the potential ability to weaken, but not kill, a target.

Scientists believe the virus that causes the fever can survive high temperatures and be difficult to detect. The Pentagon first approved a diagnostic test for the virus in 2011.

Although a vaccine was developed in Australia for the virus, DTRA documents show, it has multiple side effects, so a better vaccine is needed.

The Soviet Union also developed a Q fever-based biological weapon in the 1970s, and it was believed the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein was trying to develop one, too. "Advances in culturing *C. burnetii* may facilitate access to this agent, genetic manipulation, and the growth of large quantities," DTRA documents show, which increases the concern that rogue regimes and terrorist groups may develop the ability to create a biological weapon with it.

Records show the Pentagon remains intently focused on the potential threat of chemical and biological weapons. In October, DTRA announced a contract for a company to develop treatments of two other bacteria listed as biological agents - *B. pseudomallei* and *Francisella tularensis*.