



**MARILYN W. THOMPSON**

**THE KILLER  
STRAIN**

**ANTHRAX  
AND A GOVERNMENT EXPOSED**

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Marilyn Thompson author of  
**The Killer Strain**  
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## **ABOUT MARILYN THOMPSON**

### **Author of *The Killer Strain: Anthrax and A Government Exposed***

Marilyn Thompson began her career at the *Columbia Record* in Columbia, South Carolina as a governmental affairs and investigative reporter. She was named a Congressional Fellow in 1982 by the American Political Science Association. From 1982 to 1986, she worked at the *Philadelphia Daily News* as a general assignment and investigative reporter and then moved to the *New York Daily News* in 1986 as a general assignment reporter. She was promoted to Assistant City Editor for investigations in 1987 and then transferred to the Washington bureau in 1988 to cover the Justice Department. While in New York, Thompson broke the first stories of government contract fraud by the Wedtech Corp. and covered the ensuing scandal for several years. She wrote *Feeding The Beast: How Wedtech Became the Most Corrupt Little Company in America* (Charles Scribner & Sons) and co-authored *Ol' Strom: An Unauthorized Biography of Strom Thurmond* with Jack Bass (Longstreet Press). Her new book, *The Killer Strain: Anthrax and A Government Exposed* will be published April 1, 2003 (HarperCollins).

Thompson joined *The Washington Post* in 1990 as government reporter in Prince George's County. She was promoted to Metropolitan Projects Editor in 1991. She moved to the National desk in 1992 as Deputy National Editor for domestic coverage, then became Investigations Editor, and was later promoted to Assistant Managing Editor in charge of the Investigative team in 1999.

Marilyn Thompson was born in Salisbury, N.C. in 1952 and is a graduate of Clemson University. She has two sons and lives near Annapolis, MD.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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“A taut, balanced, and deeply researched account of the anthrax letter attacks and their aftermath...It’s a book that describes the reality of bioterrorism, and it holds lessons for emergency planners and for everyone, as we ponder whether anyone will ever be arrested for these microbial murders”

—Richard Preston, author of *The Hot Zone* and *The Demon in the Freezer*

# ***THE KILLER STRAIN***

## ***Anthrax and a Government Exposed***

**Marilyn W. Thompson**

On October 2, 2001, Bob Stevens, a 63-year-old tabloid photo editor, walked into a Boca Raton emergency room, then swiftly fell into a coma and died. The bacteria clouding his spinal fluid confounded doctors. Before long, this medical mystery would emerge as a second sinister act of terrorism, striking mere weeks after the horror of 9/11. From the assembly lines of the U.S. Postal Service to the Florida headquarters of *The Sun* and *The National Enquirer*, from the Manhattan offices of NBC News, *The New York Post*, and Capitol Hill to the suburbs of Connecticut, an unknown killer delivered America a blood-curdling message: the germs of warfare could attack anywhere, anytime, even on your next trip to the mailbox. Before the year’s end, five people died in agony, 10,000 more lined up for the protection of antibiotics, and countless lived in fear due to a chain of letters stuffed with lethal anthrax—and the ineptitude of our federal government.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative team editor, Marilyn W. Thompson played a pivotal role in directing *The Washington Post*’s coverage of America’s first genuine encounter with bioterrorism on our own soil. Based on hundreds of hours of interviews and thousands of pages of government documents, she presents the definitive account of the quick, insidious work of this weapon of mass destruction—and the deadly mistakes of the Bush administration—in **THE KILLER STRAIN: *Anthrax and a Government Exposed*** (HarperCollins Publishers; April 1, 2003; \$25.95).

Among the scores of people Thompson interviewed—including FBI agents on the case, scientists behind the scenes, and victims—three emerge as major characters in the vivid, gripping drama:

- John W. Ezzell, a microbiologist with the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, who tried to warn America about the “weaponized” quality of the anthrax packed in a letter sent to Senator Tom Daschle—until his boss relayed a direct order from Capitol Hill to tone down his analysis.
- Dr. Jeffrey Koplan, then director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who was thwarted by the Bush administration’s heavy-handed political handling of the first public health crisis involving a bioterror agent—and resigned from his job soon after the anthrax attacks.
- Leroy “Rich” Richmond, a dedicated U.S. Postal Service worker for 32 years, who inhaled anthrax on

the job at the Brentwood postal distribution center in Washington—after federal officials knew the danger. A rare inhalation survivor, Richmond lost his short-term memory, and still regularly sees lung and heart specialists, as well as a psychiatrist to manage his depression and panic attacks.

Thompson says of her forthright, courageous sources: “All of them wanted this story told in the hopes that it would enlighten future responses to bioterror threats.”

Beyond the suspense, the intrigue, and the inspiring stories of remarkable individuals, **THE KILLER STRAIN** is a stinging exposé of our government’s failure to protect its citizens. Among many staggering facts, Thompson reveals:

- How our government was aware of anthrax’s formidable power since the 1970s, spent billions on preparedness drills at the federal level, and yet did nothing to prepare the nation’s hospitals and police to respond to an anthrax assault.
- Why federal officials overlooked the obvious danger of anthrax letters passing undetected through the U.S. postal system—and simply handed blue collar postal workers the woefully inadequate protection of white vinyl gloves and facemasks, while doling out the preventive antibiotic Cipro like candy on Capitol Hill.
- How elite research scientists had been using the mail to exchange anthrax samples for decades—and how more than a few of the scientists sought out by federal agencies for their expertise were also on the FBI’s list of suspects with the specialized knowledge to carry out the crimes.
- How a trail of letters, hoaxes, and compelling coincidences led authorities to target Dr. Stephen Jay Hatfill, a medical researcher turned “bioterror expert,” as a key “person of interest”—and why the FBI has kept him under round-the-clock surveillance for over a year, while hoping for a critical break in the case.
- How the Bush administration’s efforts to control information and downplay risk ultimately cost two postal workers their lives—and why a decade-old government contract scandal stood in the way of vaccinating American citizens for future protection against the anthrax bacteria.
- How in the months after the anthrax attacks, President Bush doubled the annual budget for bioterrorism preparedness to \$1.5 billion—and how officials at the CDC and a host of other agencies have been frenetically working to upgrade their laboratories and training programs, striving to narrow the unsettling odds that the bumbling responses to the 2001 anthrax letters could happen again.

As the threat of a biological or chemical assault looms larger each day with the increasing reality of war against Iraq, **THE KILLER STRAIN** sounds an urgent wake-up call to all Americans.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Marilyn W. Thompson**, an award-winning investigative reporter and editor, has devoted her career to exposing government scandal. She is currently Assistant Managing Editor for Investigations at *The Washington Post*, where she has won two team Pulitzer Prizes for public service. She is also the author of *Feeding The Beast: How Wedtech Became the Most Corrupt Little Company in America* and the co-author, along with Jack Bass, of *Ol’ Strom: An Unauthorized Biography of Strom Thurmond*. She lives in Maryland.

## Advance Praise for *The Killer Strain: Anthrax and a Government Exposed*

“*The Killer Strain* is a taut, balanced, and deeply researched account of the anthrax letter attacks and their aftermath. Marilyn Thompson’s book shows the government failing to understand the seriousness of a pinch of powdered anthrax in the air in postal facilities, and she details the cost in human lives. It’s a book that describes the reality of bioterrorism, and it holds lessons for emergency planners and for everyone, as we ponder whether anyone will ever be arrested for these microbial murders.”

—**Richard Preston**, author of *The Hot Zone* and *The Demon In The Freezer*

“From the first envelope’s ‘puff of white smoke’ to the latest on the FBI’s pursuit of the perpetrator, a dramatic, chilling account of “when the anthrax hit the fan” in Florida, New York City, and Washington, D.C. by one of the country’s best investigative reporters.”

—**Benjamin C. Bradlee**, former Executive Editor, *Washington Post*

“Marilyn Thompson is a great American property. In *The Killer Strain*, she tells of government blunders and bad judgments that are the country’s weakness. She serves a nervous public by writing the truth.”

—**Jimmy Breslin**

“Marilyn Thompson sets her sights on the anthrax case and exposes a series of appalling government miscalculations and screwups. She is a Washington spin doctor’s worst nightmare.”

—**Michael Isikoff**, author of *Uncovering Clinton*

“Marilyn Thompson, a smart and fearless journalist, has done the nation a great service by putting her considerable talents to work on the anthrax story. *The Killer Strain* puts a human face on the tragedy while at last answering the essential questions and shattering the lingering myths.”

—**David Maraniss**, author of *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*

“Make no mistake about it, Marilyn Thompson’s history of America’s first exposure to bioterrorism is a thriller. Her account of each anthrax-by-mail case has all the suspense of a car chase.”

—**Mary McGrory**

### THE KILLER STRAIN

#### *Anthrax and a Government Exposed*

By Marilyn W. Thompson

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“Marilyn Thompson, a smart and fearless journalist, has done the nation a great service by putting her considerable talents to work on the anthrax story. *The Killer Strain* puts a human face on the tragedy while at last answering the essential questions and shattering the lingering myths.”

–**David Maraniss**, author of *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi*

March 2003

Dear Editor/Producer:

### **Is the U.S. government ready for another biological attack?**

As we prepare to go to war and continue to live with the threat of bioterrorism on U.S. soil – not to mention use of biological weapons, like anthrax, on U.S. troops and Israel by Saddam Hussein – **THE KILLER STRAIN: *Anthrax and a Government Exposed*** should be required reading for any American who cares about their or their children’s health and future in a perilous new age.

From author Marilyn W. Thompson, a prize-winning writer and editor who runs the investigative team at *The Washington Post*, comes a riveting account of America’s first bioterror attack and the trail of government mistakes and miscalculations that left five people dead and thousands more exposed to the deadly anthrax bacteria. **THE KILLER STRAIN** goes behind the scenes to recreate in vivid, often shocking detail the nation’s first real-life struggle with a long-feared weapon of mass destruction.

Described by *Publishers Weekly* as “...a medical mystery that has the tension and pace of Richard Preston’s *The Hot Zone*,” **THE KILLER STRAIN** is an exposé of government at its worst. It shows how federal agencies stumbled in their trial run with bioterrorism in late 2001, exacerbating the crisis with bad judgment calls, inaccurate medical advice, poor agency coordination, slow-footed law enforcement and political spin control orchestrated by the Bush administration. The handling of the crisis bodes poorly for a country that for decades kept loose controls over its own supplies of deadly pathogens – and now must face the prospect that germs may have fallen into the hands of enemies

Despite the billions invested in terrorism preparedness and hundreds of hoaxes that should have bolstered the government’s response, the nation was terrorized by a killer using the U.S. Mail as an accomplice. Critical agencies were “flying by the seat of their pants,” as one official recalled. And absolutely no one was in charge.

On a positive note, the anthrax experience provided what Thompson calls a useful “dress rehearsal” for our government to better prepare for another biological assault. Hospitals have been outfitted with new bioterror emergency plans and the new director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Julie Gerberding, has made it the CDC’s mission to focus on controlling the spread of such germs and chemicals if inflicted on a city or community and informing local health officials and the general public how to respond to exposure.

Thompson details some specific mistakes made by the government during the anthrax attacks that hopefully can be avoided in a future emergency. She describes:

- How two postal workers died needlessly and others were severely infected during a week in which federal agencies bickered over the wisdom of shutting down the mail system and placing thousands of blue-collar postal workers on preventative antibiotics, even as those same drugs flowed freely on Capitol Hill.
- Why Leroy Richmond, one of the anthrax victims from the Brentwood postal distribution center in Washington, has a strong case against the government as he pursues a \$100 million lawsuit against the Postal Service.
- How microbiologist John Ezzell tried to warn the world that the anthrax he examined at the U.S. Army Institute for Medical Research in Infectious Diseases was lethal enough to kill anyone in its path. Terrified, he snorted a bleach

solution after finally containing the aerosol powder packed into a letter sent to Capitol Hill. Rather than heeding Ezzell's primal scream, the Bush administration and congressional committees debated the nuances of the scientist's wording. His boss was called to Capitol Hill in the midst of the crisis to tone down Ezzell's description of the anthrax as "weaponized" in quality.

- How a trail of letters, hoaxes and intriguing circumstantial clues in the fall and winter of 2001 eventually led the FBI to the door of Stephen Jay Hatfill, a medical doctor turned bioweapons expert. The bureau has had Hatfill under around-the-clock surveillance for months, hoping for a critical break in the case. **THE KILLER STRAIN** analyzes why the case drags on more than a year after agents first targeted him.
- The real story of why Jeffrey Koplan, the former director of the huge U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, abruptly resigned from his job soon after the anthrax attacks. He offers his story of the Bush administration's heavy-handed political handling of the first public health crisis involving a bioterror agent.
- Why a decade-old government contract scandal has left the United States unable to vaccinate its citizens for protection against the anthrax bacteria.

**THE KILLER STRAIN** is at once a gripping account of a still unresolved crime and a stinging exposé of oversight at the highest levels of American government – made all the more relevant by the looming possibility that the United States will attack Iraq over concerns that it is poised to launch a biological or chemical assault. I hope you will share our enthusiasm for this important book and give it serious consideration for a review or interview.

Sincerely,

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*Is America prepared for another anthrax attack?*

**For expert insights and the real story behind the deadly anthrax letters of 2001, ask**

**Marilyn W. Thompson,**

***Author of *The Killer Strain: Anthrax and a Government Exposed****

1. As an investigative reporter and editor for *The Washington Post*, you were deeply involved in covering every aspect of the chain of anthrax-packed letters that terrorized America in the months after 9/11. Why did you decide to further probe and vividly chronicle this insidious crime?
2. What intrigued you about Leroy “Rich” Richmond, the front-line postal worker and survivor of inhalation anthrax? What did you learn about both the personal toll and the national crime of anthrax from your interviews with this victim?
3. In your opinion, could the two postal workers who died from anthrax bacteria have been spared their excruciating death? Did federal officials simply overlook or blatantly ignore the danger of anthrax letters passing undetected through the U.S. postal system? Why weren’t postal workers given preventive antibiotics?
4. Another pivotal player in your narrative is John W. Ezzell, a microbiologist with the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases. What was most surprising and unsettling about his disclosures of the Bush administration’s knowledge of anthrax’s deadly power—particularly the “weaponized” quality of the anthrax delivered in those cryptic letters?
5. In what specific ways did the President, Congress, and federal agencies mishandle the first real-life bioterrorist attack on our own turf? In your view, why didn’t the billions spent on bioterrorism preparedness drills at the federal level pay off for the American people?
6. **THE KILLER STRAIN** is the first book to tell the full, unvarnished story of why Dr. Jeffrey Koplan, former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, abruptly resigned from his job soon after the anthrax attacks. What were his major points of contention with the Bush administration’s handling of the first public health crisis involving germs of warfare?
7. Why did the United States fail at the crucial task of swiftly vaccinating its citizens for protection against the anthrax bacteria?
8. Why did the FBI’s investigation into these crimes seem to proceed at a snail’s pace? What made the scientific challenges especially sensitive and daunting?
9. How did the FBI finally come to identify Dr. Stephen Jay Hatfill as a key “person of interest” for these lethal attacks? Could you shed light on Dr. Hatfill’s possible motivations for wielding weapons of bioterror against his fellow citizens, using the U.S. mail as an accomplice?

10. Despite keeping Dr. Hatfill under round-the-clock surveillance for over a year, the FBI has yet to file charges against him. Do you see any imminent hope for the critical break in this case?
11. What concrete steps has the Bush administration taken to prepare the United States for the chilling, yet likely, possibility of another biological or a chemical assault on our own soil? What can average citizens do, right now, to protect themselves from exposure to the lethal anthrax bacteria?
12. What would you most like readers to know and heed from their encounter with **THE KILLER STRAIN**?