

**Statement from Tom Brokaw, Former Anchor and Managing Editor of NBC
Nightly News**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Let me say at the outset, this is an usual situation for me. I'm generally used to asking the questions not answering the questions. (Laughter.) But I thought it might be helpful to the panel and to others who are interested if I were to give you what you described as a personal narrative of the experience that we had at NBC when we did become the target of an anthrax attack. Let me say at the outset that I am appearing here today as a journalist, as a citizen, as an employee of NBC News, but also as a very dear friend of two people in our office who were subjected to cutaneous anthrax as a result of handling a letter that was addressed to me. I hope by the end of my remarks that there will be something instructive in all of this. I'm sure that you'll share my conclusion as well that my narrative is unsettling even now, seven years later.

First of all, I think it's important that you understand that this letter arrived in what I describe as a culture of chaos, not just because it was new room, because we'd been under attack in this country and there was a great unsettled feeling, not just at 30 Rockefeller Plaza but throughout the city of New York and the environs and across the country. I think that's important because any biological attack or nuclear attack, for that matter, will create chaos and we have to make very difficult decisions in that kind of a culture.

We can go through these exercises and hear testimony in these kinds of quiet rooms and contemplate the consequences of it but I can assure you that what you'll learn in the course of my narrative is that we were doing this on the fly. It was like changing tires on a truck going 90 miles an hour and trying figure out which tires fit on which wheels and trying to keep everything moving in the same direction.

I brought with me a calendar so that you can have a sense of both the frustration and the length of the ordeal that we went through. So far as we can tell, now, stitching it back together, the letter was postmarked on September 18th. We think it arrived in our office the next day, the 19th or 20th. The memories are unclear on that. A young woman opened the letter in the outer part of the NBC newsroom. It was her assignment at the news desk as an entry-level position. She opened the letter, a lot of granular material spilled out it. She swept it into a wastebasket with a plastic lining and then sent the letter on to my assistant. And incidentally, for the purposes of this narrative, they shall go nameless. In the case of my assistant, she always cherished her privacy. The young woman who opened the letter in the front of the newsroom has written about her experience but I'll leave it to her to describe her own ordeal.

The letter arrives on my assistant's desk because I was so busy with what I was doing and she was so good at what she did. She decided not to bother me with it because there were a number of those kinds of letters that we were getting. Some of them were threatening, others were typical off-the-wall kinds of mail that we would get on a daily basis and some of them were pretty suggestive in terms of what they thought should happen to me for any remarks that I may have made on the air.

My assistant was a wife of a New York City policeman so her security radar was probably a little higher than a normal executive assistant would have. She set the letter off to the side. I saw it maybe on the second day and as I walked by, I said, well, if you think he's going to threaten my life, he could at least be grammatical. It was a pretty crudely written letter. (Laughter.) I picked it up, looked at it, put it back down. What I didn't know at that time – and this is now, I think, the last week of September, around the 24th or 25th – what I didn't know at the time is that she had also opened another letter, my assistant, and some white powder had spilled out and she was immediately suspicious of that. So she sent that white powder on to the NBC security detail and by the end of the third week, the last week in September, my assistant said she wasn't feeling well and she went home. Again, she didn't bother me because she knew I was so pre-occupied. I was operating on a 24/7 cycle.

The following week, the first week of October, one of the NBC security people stopped me in the hallway and said, you know, that white powder that we tested for you, it's negative. And I said, what white powder and they said, well, your assistant gave us this white powder and it's totally negative. In the meantime, my assistant is not feeling well at all, kind of flu-like symptoms begins to develop a skin rash. The young woman who had opened the first letter was feeling even worse. She had swollen glands. She was told by her physician it was probably a reaction to a medicine that she was taking for an asthma condition, Accutane. She stayed at home for a couple of days. We had no idea, at that point, that she had opened what turned out to be the villainous letter.

By the end of that first week in October – it's now been 10 days since my assistant handled the letter – she's been on the phone to the FBI, to the New York City Police Department, and she's been to see a doctor and everyone says to her when she raises the question, could this be anthrax? Not a chance. No way. I first began to learn that there's something called a brown recluse spider that has a very similar footprint to anthrax and she was told it might have been a spider bite.

When I talked to her on Friday the fifth of October, she was really exercised. She didn't feel that she was getting any straight answers from anyone. She was beginning to be concerned about her health. The reports of anthrax were out there that had been described by the national news media and by public health officials. She is at that point, however, on Cipro. So Saturday, Sunday, sixth and seventh, she's at home. We check in a couple of times. She said I'm feeling a little better. I'm going to come into work on Monday.

She comes into work on Monday the eighth and she said, I'm actually feeling quite a bit better. She goes into the restroom with two her colleagues and are a good friends of mine. They came out. One of them came to me immediately and said this is a god awful mess. It's a big scabrous mess. It can't be good. I said to her, we've got to get additional medical care for this. She'd already been to see at least one dermatologist at that point. Let me just also say in parenthetically, I think I've got the timeline right. My notes were destroyed when they cleaned out my office, it turns out. (Chuckles.) So on –

I said let's find Kevin Cahill. Somebody Peggy knows well, he's a well-known infectious disease expert who has operated a lot of his practice in the third world. He's, in effect, our family doctor because the Brokaw spend a lot of time in the third world and we bring back these various conditions and he's been treating us for 25 years. A wonderful little Irish-American-missionary-sort of physician.

On Tuesday morning, the ninth of October, I had an early appointment, called Kevin and his assistant said he's on his way to NYU medical school. I said he has to stay in the office. There's something very important to me. I'm sending up my assistant. I got a hold of my assistant who was already on the way at that point. Goes up to see him. Kevin calls me that afternoon, the ninth. Now, we're now talking two, almost three weeks after we think the letter arrived and for the first time, someone says to me, I can't rule it out. It could be anthrax. It looks what I've seen in Africa before. I'm sending her to a dermatologist I know and we'll get some biopsies.

Well, understandably, my assistant was in a meltdown phase. She has a toddler at home. She has been sent in every possible direction except the right one for the last three weeks and she's – and we know nothing about anthrax. You know, what the consequences could be. What it means in terms of having gone home. How much she might have carried on her clothing. We sent her to the dermatologist and then I did something I've never talked about in public before.

I opened up a back channel Fort Detrick in Maryland. We had been dealing with them some and I talked to two uniform officials at Fort Detrick, whose name shall remain anonymous for the purposes of this discussion, and I said to them I need some help. We're not getting any straight answers. You're supposed to be the leading the authorities in this country on biological warfare and weaponry. Could you talk to my secretary? And they said yes, we'd like to talk to her.

We put her on the phone and they talked to her for some length about where she'd been the week before and what it looks like and what she'd been through and how she was feeling. I get back on the phone with them and they said, you know, we don't think it's anthrax. We think it's a brown, reclusive spider. It has the same characteristics. I said well, do me an additional favor. If I get a biopsy to you, will you test it for me? And they said, you know, that's not the business we're in. We work for the Army. And I said I understand these are extraordinary circumstances and you'll be protected. And they said, okay, get us a biopsy. Make sure it's taken from a separate part of the scabrous mass from which the first biopsy is taken.

So we sent those instructions to the dermatologist. We got two biopsies delivered to my office. We arranged for a motorcycle courier to meet an airplane in Washington, raced it out to Fort Detrick on Wednesday, the 10th of October. On the 11th of October, Fort Detrick called me back and said it's not anthrax. We don't have a match. I was enormously relieved. I called my assistant, who was still deeply suspicious that it could be anthrax and was not utterly reassured by what she had heard from Fort Detrick. But I was enormously relieved at that point.

Early Friday morning, I went out with my dogs for a run, came back in feeling pretty good about life. I thought we were going through this. It had been an utter nightmare mostly for those two women to say nothing of the upheaval that it had caused at NBC. Went out for a run and the phone rang at about 7:15 and the news desk said to me Bernie Kerik, the police commissioner, is trying to find you and I thought, oh my god, it's anthrax because what I had been told the day before is the CDC lab had broken down so they couldn't get a test on the Thursday before when Fort Detrick could and they had worked through the night to try to get a reasonable read on all of this.

Simultaneously while we're going through all of this, there's kind of an unsettled feeling in the building but we're confining it because we don't want to cause undue panic. You know, we're operating based on what we're being told by very authoritative sources. Well, when we're told that it is in fact is an anthrax attack, that they have cutaneous anthrax, all hell broke loose at 30 Rock. There were no systems in place. No systems in place, with all due respect to our guests who are here today for the FBI.

Rudy Giuliani had not even heard that we'd been suspicious that there might be an anthrax attack. He came storming into the meeting on the 52nd floor, which was, to this day, one of the most dramatic I've ever been involved. You can only imagine. We've got Jeff Immelt, who has been on the job for five days, was the CEO of General Electric, the head of the CDC on the conference call, the Speyer Tishman representatives, me, Mayor Giuliani, Bob Wright, who is the president of NBC and we're all operating on a basis of we don't know what's going on or what we should do next. No one had a clue about where we should go and how we should do it.

We did decide, on the spot, that we were going to have to clear out those offices and that there would be a mass inoculation of Cipro and it turns out that I think tourists who walked by three weeks earlier came in and got Cipro shots. (Chuckles.) I mean, we were inoculating people for 36 hours and it was comforting up to a point but it was also utterly chaotic. I'm happy to say that the resolution of all of this has been for the two people that I care most about is that they're going to live with this ordeal for the rest of their lives. It was a very hard physical and emotional recovery for both of them but they're at a stage in their lives and I think I can fairly say that they're moving on now and their lives have been stitched back together. But I'm confident that on this day they are thinking about their ordeal again and wondering how close did I come.

In the case of my assistant, we completely cleaned out her house. Completely took it down to the studs in the wall, threw out everything, and had people come in and do that. And only after we were absolutely assured and had been certified that it had been clean, she then moved out and the house went up for sale with everyone knowing what the history of the house was. In the case of the assistant, the person who was the news desk assistant opened first letter, worked for us for another couple of years, retired about a year ago, I guess, to go back to her family life in Massachusetts. When I was preparing for this appearance here today, I thought, well, let's see how far we've come.

When Tom Ridge was the secretary of Homeland Security, he came to New York. We had a private dinner meeting with Dan, Peter, and me, and a representative of CNN about how prepared we were should there be another biological attack or a dirty bomb of some kind and we were questioned fairly closely by Secretary Ridge, who was new in the job and only been there about a month. He said, well, how much do you know about what you can put on the air?

And I said, with all due respect Mr. Secretary, that's your job. We're going to find out from you and he said, well, how do we get that to you? And I said, how about a website? (Chuckles.) How about if you have a really sophisticated website, we put that on the air? We just go directly on the air with it. So I thought I would check Homeland Security website before I came down here today. I typed in anthrax attack. I got a keynote address by the assistant secretary of health on the meaning of an anthrax attack, remarks by the Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff, a testimony by a physician before the House of Representatives, testimony of an assistant secretary chief medical officer about how a prophylaxis program will be initiated early to reduce the economic impact of anthrax. I got almost no information that would be useful me in that culture of chaos if I needed help to find out where I go, what it looks like, and what the next course of action should be.

It seems to me that just a fundamental tool would be a page with links. I live in New York City. I think we've got an anthrax attack. Physicians, public health officials, and law enforcement officials who can respond to this. What does it look like? Graphic pictures. You know, this is what cutaneous anthrax looks like. This is what the consequences should be. The public health guideline is if there is a biological attack it may not be immediately obvious. Are you the group or area where authorities consider to be in danger?

This is public health 101 when I was in the seventh grade. This is what you do about good hygiene. This is not about addressing a real biological threat, which as we know, could have far greater consequences than it did in our case and in our case, it was tragic enough. So that's why I've broken my rule never to have testified before a commission like this or before Congress because I think it's urgent and I don't want it to happen to anyone else given what we went through. Thank you all very much.