

Extremists and the Ricin Threat

A SEASON FOR POISON

In the spring of 2013, a variety of local and federal officials, including President Barack Obama, received letters laced with the deadly toxin ricin. The various letters actually stemmed from no less than three unrelated incidents and highlighted the ease with which the poison, derived from castor beans, can be manufactured and used to threaten perceived enemies.

Extremists in the United States have long had something of a fascination with ricin, attempting to manufacture or use it on a number of occasions over the past 20+ years. These more recent incidents highlighted a somewhat different danger, in that none of the suspects in the three cases seem to have adhered to an extreme ideology, but each nevertheless allegedly chose government officials as targets.

- On April 27, federal authorities arrested James Everett Dutschke, 41, of Tupelo, Mississippi, for allegedly mailing threatening letters laced with ricin to President Obama, Mississippi Senator Roger Wicker, and Tupelo judge Sadie Holland on April 8. The letters seem to have been an attempt to frame a local rival of Dutschke's. According to the indictment, Dutschke wrote the letters using phrases, verbiage and signature lines often used by his perceived enemy in an effort to make it appear as if the other man sent the threatening letters.

The criminal complaint alleges that Dutschke made the ricin from castor beans he purchased online and that he used the Internet to research how to make the poison. A dust mask Dutschke allegedly removed from his former workplace and discarded in the trash tested positive for both ricin and Dutschke's DNA. While it appears the letters were mailed to retaliate against his rival, Dutschke did have previous encounters with two of the victims. He unsuccessfully ran for public office against Judge Holland's son, and he allegedly met Senator Wicker while frequenting GOP events.

- On May 22, FBI agents arrested Matthew Ryan Buquet, 37, of Spokane, Washington, for allegedly mailing a letter containing ricin toxin to U.S. District Judge Fred Van Sickle. Authorities have also linked Buquet to ricin-laced letters sent to President Obama, the West Riverside Post office in Spokane, the nearby Fairchild Air Force Base, and the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in McLean, Virginia. The letters, all post marked in Spokane on May 13, bore addresses similarly penned in red ink.
- On June 7, federal agents arrested actress Shannon Rogers Richardson, 35, of New Boston, Texas, for allegedly mailing ricin-laced letters in May to President Obama, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, as well as Mark Glaze, the director of a gun control advocacy group associated with Bloomberg. The letters threatened violence against gun-control advocates. This incident, too, appears to have been an attempt at framing someone.

According to the FBI's affidavit, Richardson first contacted police and implicated her estranged husband by saying she suspected he had sent the letters. She allegedly claimed to have found castor beans in their home and a sticky note on her husband's desk with addresses for the president and

Bloomberg. After further investigation, agents began to suspect that it was Richardson herself who had sent the letters. Richardson has since changed her story, allegedly admitting to mailing the letters while knowing they contained ricin, but insisting that her husband forced her to participate in the crime.

The affidavit alleges that during a search of the couple's home, agents found castor beans, ricin toxin and syringes that could be used to extract ricin. Additionally, investigators say that Richardson's husband was at work when Internet searches related to the letters were made and at the time the letters were postmarked.

Taken together, the ricin incidents highlight the possibility of a disturbing trend of disgruntled individuals using the deadly poison to settle scores or endanger government officials. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a variety of people, both extremists and non-extremists, employed similar letters seemingly laced with anthrax in an attempt to harass perceived enemies or generally create havoc. However, with the exception of the September 2001 anthrax letters sent in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, all the remaining anthrax letters were actually hoaxes. Ricin, on the other hand, is far easier to obtain and use in such a fashion. Should more copycat ricin letters occur, there could conceivably be casualties.

THE DEADLY FASCINATION

For more than 15 years, a plethora of analysts and pundits have constructed a variety of frightening scenarios involving domestic or international terrorists employing chemical or biological agents, such as Sarin nerve gas or anthrax, as weapons of mass destruction. Yet the actual number of incidents involving chem-bio agents has remained quite small, regardless of terrorist group or movement.

Though it is a threat that cannot be discounted, the chem-bio terrorist threat is a low-probability threat. The main reason for this is simple: extremist movements tend to stick with weapons and tactics with which they are comfortable. Conventional weapons, such as guns, explosives, and incendiary devices, can kill quite easily and effectively. Moreover, they require skills that can easily be taught (there is no shortage of instructors), and they also tend to pose less risk to their users. People use these weapons because they are familiar and because they are effective.

However, there is one "exotic" weapon that extremists (and non-extremists) do experiment with from time to time, and this is the biological toxin ricin, a powdery substance derived from common castor beans, yet so deadly that even the tiniest amount has the potential to be fatal. Not a true biological agent, because it cannot effectively be weaponized (it is hard to absorb through the skin, meaning it usually must be inhaled or ingested to do harm), it nevertheless can be extremely dangerous in the hands of someone wishing to do ill. It requires little skill to make, and instructions are readily available. It is, in a sense, a "poor man's anthrax."

In fact, ricin is so easily made that ricin-related incidents occur every couple of years in the United States. Many of these incidents are not related to extremism or terrorism, but rather fall into the category of mundane poisoning attempts.

Nevertheless, because it is so readily available and easily prepared, ricin has been attractive to extremists and terrorists, both domestic and international. Instructions on how to make ricin have been found in Al

Qaeda terrorist training manuals, for example. In 2011, U.S. intelligence officials reportedly claimed that Al Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has been manufacturing ricin and experimenting on ways in which it can be used. Earlier, in April 2005, a Muslim extremist, Kamel Bourgass, was convicted in Great Britain for plotting to manufacture and spread ricin. Police had found castor beans and instructions on making ricin, but no actual ricin.

The interest in ricin seems even greater among right-wing extremists than among Islamic extremists. In 2010, for example, Ian Davison, a British white supremacist associated with the Aryan Strike Force, as well as his 19-year-old son of the same name, were convicted on charges related to a plot to manufacture ricin to be used against ethnic and religious minorities. They actually had a jar full of ricin when arrested. The elder Davison pleaded guilty to producing a chemical weapon, preparing acts of terrorism, three counts of possessing material useful to commit acts of terror and one count of possessing a prohibited weapon. His son was convicted on lesser charges.

RICIN AT HOME

In the United States, domestic right-wing extremist groups (both anti-government extremists and white supremacists) have long had a fascination with ricin. At gun shows, survivalist expos, and in all sorts of places across the Internet, extremists can easily purchase manuals (or download pirated versions of them) such as *The Poor Man's James Bond*, *Ragnar's Action Encyclopedia of Practical Knowledge and Proven Techniques*, *Silent Death*, *The Catalogue of Silent Tools of Justice*, and *The Poisoner's Handbook*. Many of these manuals were written by or for right-wing extremists; all include ricin-making instructions and sometimes advice on its use. The author of *The Poisoner's Handbook*, for example, suggests the poisoning of IRS workers by lacing tax return forms with ricin.

As a result, the existence and nature of ricin is fairly well known among right-wing extremists, who occasionally discuss its use, or even advocate or applaud its use. In 2004, following the discovery of ricin in the mailroom of a U.S. Senate building (see below), white supremacist radio host Hal Turner expressed hope that the ricin was potent and that many Senators had inhaled it. "I want to congratulate and thank whoever did this," Turner said, "That person is a hero in my book, and again, I sincerely hope that a lot of U.S. Senators have inhaled the stuff and the filthy sons-of-bitches will drop dead. Turner is currently serving a prison sentence for having threatened to kill federal judges.

The ease with which people can manufacture ricin, and the extremist interest in the deadly substance, has created a track record in the United States of extremist-related ricin incidents that dates back nearly 20 years, long before the recent arrests in Alaska and Georgia. Some of these earlier incidents include:

- In November 2011, a federal grand jury handed down indictments against four members of a north Georgia militia cell related to an alleged plot to conduct "armed attacks on government buildings and federal government employees, including law enforcement agents." In addition, the group's ringleader, Frederick Thomas, allegedly also discussed killing politicians, government officials (including U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder), business leaders, and journalists. According to authorities, Thomas had even cased two federal office buildings in Atlanta as possible targets. Thomas and Emory Dan Roberts, both associated with the Georgia Militia, were charged with conspiring to possess an unregistered explosive device and illegal possession of a silencer.

The other two men involved in the alleged plot—Ray Adams and Samuel Crump—were indicted with a different set of charges. They were both charged with conspiracy to possess and produce a biological toxin and with attempted production of a biological toxin. According to the indictment, starting in September 2011, Crump and Adams conspired to manufacture ricin—and to use it. They reportedly hoped to make 10 pounds of the deadly poison to spread in a number of cities. Crump allegedly proposed spreading the ricin on interstate highways so that passing cars could spread it into the air and disperse it. It was after authorities learned that the plotters were allegedly attempting to extract ricin, and that they had access to a supply of castor beans, that they made the arrests in the case. In April 2012, Thomas and Roberts pleaded guilty to weapons charges; Adams and Crump have not yet been tried.

- In January 2011, FBI agents arrested 54-year-old Jeffrey Boyd Levenderis, of Tallmadge, Ohio, after Levenderis made comments to someone about a dangerous substance in a coffee can in his foreclosed home. When the substance turned out to be what Levenderis later described as "high-grade ricin," he was charged with one count of possessing a biological toxin and one count of making false statements. Levenderis said that he had ground the ricin to a fine powder in an attempt to make it suitable for airborne delivery. Though authorities tried to downplay any suggestions of terrorism or extremism, Levenderis was apparently a fan of the Jeff Rense Program, an anti-Semitic and conspiracy-oriented radio show, and had in the past even submitted artwork to its extensive associated Web site.
- In 2005, police in Kansas pulled over a 58-year-old man from Arizona, Denys Ray Hughes. Hughes told the officers that he could be considered a survivalist or militia member. After discovering glass containers, guns, and books about bomb-making in the vehicle, the officers alerted the ATF, which launched an investigation. In Hughes' Phoenix apartment, they found castor bean plants, a pipe bomb, various bomb-making components, and an illegal silencer. In a cabin he owned in Wisconsin, authorities found ricin formulas, bottles of castor beans, and dimethyl sulfoxide (which theoretically can allow ricin to penetrate the skin), as well as 43 guns. He also had many of the manuals listed in the previous section. Hughes had been growing castor bean plants, cultivating thousands of seeds. In 2006, a federal jury convicted Hughes of attempted production of a biological toxin for use as a weapon, possession of an unregistered destructive device, and possession of an unregistered silencer. He was sentenced to 87 months in prison. However, after serving several years in prison, Hughes was released from federal prison and ordered to report to a halfway house in Milwaukee in May 2011 to finish his sentence. Hughes never showed up at the facility; as of June 2011, he is an "armed and dangerous" fugitive being sought by the U.S. Marshal's Service.
- In early 2005, authorities in Ocala, Florida, arrested a 22-year-old man, Steven Michael Ekberg, charging him with illegal possession of ricin. Searching his home after receiving a tip, the FBI found 83 castor beans and "byproducts consistent with the manufacture of ricin." They also found Internet and printed recipes for ricin and other dangerous items, in addition to a number of firearms. Ekberg had allegedly told his former roommate that he would have to "take some sort of action" if the federal government ever did anything to him. Ekberg eventually pleaded guilty to unlawful possession of ricin.

- In 2004, federal agents in Massachusetts raided the apartment of Michael Crooker, 57, after intercepting an apparent homemade silencer (which turned out to be legal). While searching the apartment, agents discovered a home laboratory of sorts, along with castor seeds. They also found bomb-making materials at his residence and an explosive in his car. Crooker's father subsequently found a buried vial of ricin on the property. In jail, Crooker told other inmates that he knew how to make ricin and had in fact previously manufactured it. However, angry about his arrest, Crooker also sent a threatening letter to a federal prosecutor, threatening to send toxins through the mail and writing, "As martyr [Timothy] McVeigh's T-shirt says: 'The Tree of Liberty must be refreshed from time to time by the blood of patriots and tyrants.'" In 2011, Crooker pleaded guilty to one charge of mailing a threatening letter and one charge of possession of ricin. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison (his conviction on the silencer charge was thrown out by an appeals court).
- In early 2004, authorities discovered ricin on a sorting machine in a mail room in the U.S. Senate that served Senator Bill Frist. It apparently came from a piece of mail, but no letter was ever found. Authorities suspected a link to the recent "Fallen Angel" case (see below), but were unable to confirm a link, or to find a perpetrator. The case remains unsolved.
- In 2003, authorities discovered two letters containing ricin. One letter, mailed in October 2003, was found shortly thereafter at a mail processing center in South Carolina. The envelope contained a tiny metal vial with ricin in it. The enclosed letter, written to the Department of Transportation, contained a threat to use ricin against people if certain trucking regulations were not changed. The sender purported to be the "fleet owner of a tanker company." The second, sent in November 2003, was actually addressed to the White House, and was discovered in a similar mail center in Washington, D.C. This letter, too, contained a vial with ricin in it, and the accompanying letter, written by someone claiming to be "Fallen Angel," threatened to turn Washington, D.C., into a "ghost town" if transportation regulations were not changed. The perpetrator of these incidents has never been identified or apprehended.
- In 2000, a South African expatriate, Dr. Larry Ford, killed himself in Orange County, California, apparently because he was suspected in the attempted murder of his business partner two days earlier. A biotechnology entrepreneur, Ford also happened to be a white supremacist with a passion for neo-Nazi William Pierce's novel "The Turner Diaries." He also had ties to several anti-government extremist groups. Investigations after his death revealed that Ford possessed an unusual and deadly arsenal that ranged from machine guns and explosives to biological agents and quantities of ricin.
- In 1999, James Kenneth Gluck, 53, was arrested in Tampa, Florida, by the FBI. Until recently, Gluck had lived in Boulder, Colorado, from where he had sent threatening letters to local judges threatening to use ricin against them. In one letter, he praised the Columbine High School shootings and boasted that he could do with a briefcase what it took Timothy McVeigh an entire truckload of explosives to do. Authorities searching his home found that Gluck did indeed have the ingredients necessary to make ricin, as well as a copy of the *Anarchist Cookbook* and "several anti-government books." Gluck was convicted on threat charges.
- In 1993, Thomas Lavy was detained along the Alaskan-Canadian border, apparently returning to his Arkansas home. Canadian officials discovered racist literature, weapons, 20,000 rounds of

ammunition, cash, and 130 grams of ricin. When, sometime later, federal authorities arrested Lavy, they found castor beans along with books that included instructions on making ricin. Lavy killed himself in his jail cell several days after his arrest.

- In 1992, members of the Minnesota Patriots Council, an anti-government extremist group, produced ricin, possibly to use against a U.S. deputy marshal and a deputy sheriff they disliked (they also discussed committing other crimes, such as blowing up a federal building). Three years later, four members--Leroy Wheeler, Douglas Baker, Dennis Henderson, and Richard Oelrich--were arrested and later convicted for possession of ricin (for use as a weapon).