Extremists and the Ricin Threat

A SEASON FOR POISON

Amidst the string of arrests in the fall of 2011 of anti-government extremists across the United States on various charges, from armed standoffs to possession of illegal weapons and pipe bombs, two stand out. In both incidents, there were ties to a particularly deadly toxin derived from castor beans called ricin.

The first case involved a 53-year-old woman from Kenai, Alaska: Mary Morgan, a member of the Alaska Peacemakers Militia. This group gained some notoriety early in 2011 when its leader and other members and associates were arrested in Fairbanks on charges of plotting to kill a federal judge and federal and state law enforcement officers.

Morgan was stopped on October 27, 2011, at the Alaska-Canada border after she told custom officials she had a firearm in the vehicle (Morgan is prohibited from carrying firearms following a 2001 felony conviction). However, the firearm was perhaps the least unusual item in her vehicle. Authorities also allegedly discovered notes reportedly in her handwriting, with instructions on how to construct pipe bombs, as well as information on subjects such as poisonous plants and carrying concealed firearms without a permit. Moreover, authorities also discovered that Morgan had information downloaded from the internet on ricin. Morgan is currently being held without bail on a charge of being a felon in possession of a firearm.

In isolation, the ricin connection to Morgan might not have raised many eyebrows. However, just a few days after Morgan's arrest, 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.
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 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 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).