

**Beyond Anthrax:**  
**Extremism and the Bioterrorism Threat**



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Since the September 11 terrorist attacks on America, the nation has been victimized by a different but equally troubling sort of assault: a deliberate attempt to cause fear and panic by using anthrax as a weapon. Over 30 people in Florida, New York, and Washington, D.C., have been exposed to the anthrax bacillus, with multiple confirmed cases and several deaths, making it the largest human outbreak of anthrax in U.S. history. In addition, these genuine anthrax incidents have been accompanied by a wave of anthrax hoaxes and panics, compounding fear and anxiety.

Little evidence has so far emerged that points unambiguously toward or away from any particular source for the anthrax attacks. Law enforcement agencies continue to explore possibilities ranging from international terrorists to domestic extremists to non-ideological sociopaths. The domestic source theory interests many, particularly because right-wing extremists in America have occasionally demonstrated interest in biological and chemical agents.

Anthrax is a serious concern even in its naturally occurring form, but during the course of the 20th century it took on an even more ominous shape as a biological weapon. Its very lethality made it attractive to scientists and military specialists attempting to develop biological agents. Today, anthrax has emerged as a powerful tool in the arsenal of terrorists with the aim of spreading fear and panic across the country.

### **Extremists and Anthrax**

Composed largely of groups and individuals with white supremacist or anti-government agendas, along with a few single-issue movements such as anti-abortion extremists, the extreme right in the U.S. has been a source of domestic terrorism for decades. Targets have ranged from the government to Jews and other minority groups to abortion clinics.

Members of the far right fringe in the U.S. spend much more time dreaming of firearms and explosives than they spend fantasizing about chemical or biological agents. However, right-wing extremists have sometimes dabbled with such agents. Moreover, two important attributes of the extreme right lend credibility to this threat. The first is the growing acceptance of the use of violence on the part of many



segments of the extreme right; the second is the development within the extreme right of a cultural fixation on weapons, explosives, and other means of destruction.

### **Weapons of Destruction: The Far-Right Obsession**

The extreme right in the U.S. is a world in which guns and explosives are discussed nearly as often as political issues or concerns. The fixation of the extreme right on weapons and destructive devices, along with a general survivalist interest in hardware and equipment has created a subculture in which knowledge of conventional and unconventional weaponry and warfare is admired and respected.

One can go to virtually any good-sized gun show in the country and find dealers selling Army manuals on improvised munitions as well as a host of manuals and publications by private publishers that form a virtual literary subgenre catering to a paranoid audience. Books providing guidance on manufacturing false identification lie next to "revenge" manuals that provide suggestions on how to maliciously retaliate against one's enemies. The old *Anarchist's Cookbook* has been supplanted by a variety of works outlining the manufacture of booby traps and kitchen explosives.

These books are often sold with the label "for entertainment purposes only." And indeed, for many on the extreme right, such books and manuals are nothing more than a form of asexual pornography, a way to fantasize about violence and mayhem without actually engaging in it. For others, however, the books may take on a more practical tone.

Formerly available only at gun shows, survivalist expositions, and through obscure catalogs, such books and manuals can now easily be purchased through the Internet, including from mainstream sources. Ragnar Benson, for example, has written works such as *Ragnar's Action Encyclopedia of Practical Knowledge and Proven Techniques*, a manual whose descriptive copy suggests "may be the most valuable weapon you have in your Y2K arsenal." According to the description, Benson's *Encyclopedia* includes "precise instructions, diagrams and photographs" showing readers how to "build, choose, store and use weapons, explosives and incendiaries," as well as many other "proven techniques."



A number of similar texts are currently widely available on the Internet and even from some mainstream booksellers:

- Survivalist guru Kurt Saxon is the author of *The Poor Man's James Bond*, a work similar to Benson's *Encyclopedia*. As Saxon describes it an online bookseller's Web site: "This book is the best of its kind...it is perfect for anarchists, terrorists, and revenge-seeking psychos alike, this book should never fall into the wrong hands...oh wait, that would be me and the people whom [sic] would want it." Such books not only explain how to build bombs and explosives; they also often discuss the manufacture of chemical and biological agents. Saxon, for example, has explained the manufacture of ricin in his books and videotapes.
- *Silent Death*, a book written by "Uncle Fester," provides even more detail. "Uncle Fester" – actually Green Bay chemist Steve Preisler, a convicted criminal who wrote one of his books while in prison – describes himself as the "world's foremost clandestine chemist." His book is for the "home or clandestine manufacture of poisonous materials, with an emphasis on guerrilla war applications. Topics covered [in *Silent Death*] in detail include nerve gases, ricin, botulin toxin, and much more." The Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo, who launched a poison gas attack in Tokyo's subways in 1995, had copies of Preisler's book.
- Maynard Campbell, an Oregon writer and author of *Catalogue of Silent Tools of Justice*, a guide to creating biological poisons such as ricin, was a long time white supremacist and anti-government activist whose second book, *Kingdoms at War*, included suggested tactics for the "Second North American Revolution." In fact, Campbell was eventually arrested for threatening the lives of federal officials during a 1992 standoff (he was murdered in prison in 1997 by another inmate).
- Another writer, Maxwell Hutchkinson, author of *The Poisoner's Handbook*, suggests the poisoning of IRS workers by sending in tax return forms laced with ricin.



- Timothy Tobiason, a self-taught Nebraska chemist and author of *Advanced Biological Weapons Design and Manufacture*, claims that the government has harassed him and tried to kill him. “If the government continues to do this to people,” he told a reporter from *The New York Times*, “they’re going to have a whole lot more Tim McVeighs and Tim Tobiasons.” Tobiason lives in a van and sells his book, which includes instructions on manufacturing anthrax, at gun shows across the country.

### Extremists and Chemical or Biological Weapons

The number of criminal incidents over the past several decades involving right-wing extremists and the use or planned use of firearms or explosives far outnumbers the very few incidents that have emerged in which right-wing extremists have been caught using, attempting to use, or in possession of chemical or biological agents.

Indeed, extremists have exhibited far more interest in conventional weaponry - legal and illegal firearms and explosives - than in chemical or biological warfare.

**As for anthrax, there is only one documented instance - albeit very dubious - where right-wing extremists considered using the agent (see the Republic of Texas case below).** Still there have been enough incidents involving biological or chemical agents that the possibility of their use cannot be dismissed, even if it should not be exaggerated:

- Two members of one South Texas faction of the sovereign citizen group known as the Republic of Texas, Johnie Wise and Jack Abbott Grebe, received 24-year prison sentences in 1999 for sending threatening e-mails to various federal agencies. They were acquitted of charges of planning to develop weapons of mass destruction (a third person was acquitted on all counts). This charge centered on discussions by the two men to modify a cigarette lighter to eject a cactus needle that would be coated with some sort of biological agent such as HIV, rabies, botulism-or anthrax. According to an informant, the device would be used against the families of



government employees. Although the Republic of Texas members had discussed developing rabies or anthrax for use in this fashion, they never actually made the device, nor is it clear that they would have proceeded with the rather far-fetched idea.

- In 1993, Thomas Lavy was arrested along the Alaskan-Canadian border, apparently driving back to his home in Arkansas. Canadian customs officials discovered racist literature, several weapons, 20,000 rounds of ammunition, a lot of cash, and 130 grams of what was later found to be ricin (one gram could kill well over a thousand people). When, some time later, federal authorities came to arrest Lavy at his Arkansas home they found castor beans along with books that included *The Poisoner's Handbook* and *Silent Death*. What Lavy's intentions might have been will never be known, because he killed himself in his jail cell several days after his arrest.
- Members of an anti-government group known as the Minnesota Patriots Council produced a quantity of ricin in 1992 to possibly use against a U.S. deputy marshal and a deputy sheriff they disliked (they also talked about 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) and given short sentences. They had learned about the poison from Maynard Campbell's *Silent Tools of Justice* (and in fact referred to ricin as "Maynard"). Although the Minnesota Patriots Council episode has been considerably publicized, the fact that three years elapsed between when authorities learned about the ricin and when the extremists were arrested suggest that the extremists' use of the substance was not imminent.
- One group that considered the use of chemical warfare was the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord (CSA), a white supremacist survivalist group from Missouri whose members belonged to a Christian Identity cult led by James Ellison. Ellison's group dated back to the early 1970s, but it became increasingly



violent and radical in the 1980s as a result of its visions of apocalypse and race war. People associated with the group planned and occasionally committed a variety of hate crimes and murders. When federal law enforcement agents finally broke up the group in 1985, they discovered-among the many automatic weapons, grenades, and even rockets-a 30-gallon drum of cyanide. According to Kerry Noble, the second-in-command of the CSA who later abandoned his extremism, the barrel was obtained from Klan leader Robert Miles and its purpose was to allow the CSA "in the future, when the judgment time had arrived...[to] dump the cyanide into the water supply systems of major cities." However, the judgment time never arrived and the CSA never used it.

Many people in the extreme right believe that the government is using aircraft to spread unknown chemicals on the American people (the popular "chemtrails" or "contrails" conspiracy theory). Many members of right-wing extremist groups have also been very active in attempting to convince American servicemen and servicewomen to refuse to be vaccinated for anthrax, under the impression that either the vaccine is dangerous or the vaccinations malign in purpose. And among those hardcore extremists on the far right who are willing to commit violent acts against the government or other targets, conventional weapons and explosives remain a much more popular choice.

### **A Growing Appetite for Violence**

The far right has increasingly shown an appetite for violence, especially with the development of the virulently racist and anti-Semitic ideology of hate groups such as those of the Christian identity and white supremacist movements. Anti-government militia groups have also promoted violence against the U.S. government.

Given the extreme ends and methods of so many on the far right, it is not much of a stretch to think that any means of destruction might be beyond the pale for some hardcore extremists.

The growth of **Christian Identity**, a racist and anti-Semitic pseudo-religion whose theology essentially calls for religious



warriors, as well as the growth of an extreme anti-government ideology centered around the ideas and conspiracy theories of groups like the Posse Comitatus, created a movement composed of groups and individuals who opposed the very legitimacy of the U.S. government. Where many on the far right once considered the government an ally in maintaining white supremacy, now the majority considered it an enemy intent on oppressing the white race. Similarly, extreme anti-abortion activists exhibited increasing anger at what they considered to be government protection of mass murder.

The 1980s saw the rise of explicitly white supremacist terrorist groups such as **The Order**, while the resurgence of right-wing extremism in the 1990s that followed the standoffs at Ruby Ridge and Waco caused a host of terrorist activities that ranged from bombing plots (against government buildings, civil rights organizations, natural gas processing plants, and many other targets) to assassination plots to mass murder (such as the shooting sprees of Buford Furrow, Benjamin Smith, and Richard Baumhammers).

This violent resurgence caused what was, until September 11, 2001, the worst terrorist act on U.S. soil, the April 19, 1995 bombing of the **Murrah Federal Building** in Oklahoma City.

#### **Earlier Incidents: 1970 – 1984**

During the 1970s, few Americans were concerned about anthrax. Yet by 2001, American attitudes had changed so much that terrorists realized they could cause maximum fear and panic in the U.S. by sending letters contaminated with anthrax. In the intervening years, several events occurred which successively drove American anxiety over anthrax to ever higher levels.

Actual use of chemical or biological agents by terrorist or extremist groups has been rare. **Reported or alleged incidents since 1970 include the following:**

- In the 1970s it was reported that the Weather Underground, a left-wing terrorist group, had attempted to acquire chemical or biological weapons from Fort Detrick, Maryland. Other reports emerged that the Baader-Meinhof Gang, a German left-wing terrorist



group, had acquired mustard gas in 1975 and that the Red Army Faction, another left-wing group, had acquired the botulinum toxin in 1980. However, a detailed study of these and other alleged chemical and biological incidents edited by Jonathan Tucker of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in 2000 revealed that these incidents and several others were apocryphal or largely without evidential foundation.

- In the early 1970s, Muharem Kurbegovic, a Yugoslavian-born terrorist who styled himself the "alphabet bomber," sent toxic chemicals through the mail to a Supreme Court justice and threatened to use nerve-gas devices against the Capitol and the president of the U.S. He was arrested in August 1974 for a bombing that killed three people at the Los Angeles International Airport; following the arrest, police searching his California home found that he had assembled virtually all the ingredients necessary to construct a nerve-gas bomb.
- In 1972, police arrested two teenagers, Steven Pera and Allen Schwander, who had started a small group called R.I.S.E. (it is not known what the acronym stood for) that, according to Illinois authorities, had visions of eliminating humanity, allowing R.I.S.E. members to start a new master race. New recruits to the group tipped off police, who discovered that Pera and Schwander actually had biological agents, including the typhus bacillus. The two teenagers skipped bail and fled to Cuba; Pera later returned and voluntarily surrendered, entering into a plea agreement with authorities, while Schwander was arrested by the Cuban government.
- In 1981 an environmental extremist group deposited packages containing anthrax-contaminated soil outside a chemical weapons research facility and near a political party conference in Great Britain. The group, who called themselves the "Dark Harvest Commandos," claimed to have obtained the material from Gruinard Island, whose contamination they were protesting. The group threatened to deposit more anthrax-contaminated soil at "appropriate points," although there were apparently no subsequent events.



- In Oregon, in 1984, a religious cult contaminated restaurant salad bars with salmonella in order to sicken people so that they could not participate in local elections. Hundreds of patrons came down with food poisoning, although no one died.

Considerably more common than the use or attempted use of chemical or biological agents by terrorists, extremists, or religious fringe groups was use or attempted use by non-ideological people or groups for conventional criminal purposes, such as extortion or murder.

W. Seth Carus of the National Defense University compiled a list of incidents during the past century involving biological agents; of these, the majority were criminal rather than terroristic in nature and involved attempts to poison or infect relatives, spouses, or associates. Agents involved ranged from ricin to HIV.

One example involving anthrax illustrates the character of such incidents: In 1992 a Fairfax County, Virginia, resident allegedly sprayed partygoers at his home with a substance he claimed was anthrax. In this case, the substance turned out to be harmless, but other incidents sometimes involved actual agents.

### **Anthrax Hoaxes: From Baghdad to Las Vegas**

Despite a growing concern over bioterrorism in general, as well as scattered incidents involving domestic extremists and biological or chemical agents, American concern about anthrax in the 1980s and early 1990s remained at a relatively low level. Certainly there was little hysteria or hype. However, several **events in the 1990s drastically increased both concern and publicity over anthrax**, oversensitizing the American public to the dangers of anthrax in the hands of extremists or terrorists and resulting by the end of the decade in a frustrating rash of anthrax hoaxes that, ironically, only fueled the publicity fire still further. By the beginning of the 21st century it had become abundantly clear that **the U.S. had developed an almost primal fear of anthrax – and anybody who wanted to throw the country into a panic need look no further for an instrument with which to do so.**

The event that really introduced anthrax into the public



consciousness was the Gulf War. Reports had emerged during the 1980s that the Iraq government had used chemical agents both against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and against the discontented Kurdish minority in its own country. By the end of the decade, U.S. and Israeli intelligence services had developed strong evidence of an Iraqi biological and chemical weapons program. W. Seth Carus, at the time a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, estimated in 1989 that Iraq had the capacity to produce a thousand tons of chemical agents annually. Early that same year, the Reagan administration formally acknowledged that Iraq was completing construction of a biological weapons plant and expressed "concern and displeasure" to Saddam Hussein.

Even after the Gulf War, though, anthrax was more the stuff of thrillers than a real concern. Although the threat of anthrax was highly publicized in 1990-1991, Saddam Hussein refrained from using the biological agent against a people far more capable of massive retaliation than the Iranians or Kurds. Terrorist attacks like the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 raised American concerns about terrorists, but that act involved conventional weapons. However, in 1995 the U.S. experienced a "one-two punch" that raised its concerns about biological and chemical terrorism.

Ironically, neither "punch" involved biological or chemical weapons use in the U.S. Nevertheless, together they had a tremendous impact. The first event was the March 20, 1995, use of nerve gas by the **Aum Shinrikyo** sect on the Tokyo subway in Japan. The Sarin attack killed 12 people and hospitalized thousands more.

The March 20 episode actually turned out to be the latest in a series of efforts by Aum Shinrikyo to release agents such as botulinum and anthrax in government buildings and public places, but every previous effort had ended in failure – so much so that authorities were not aware they had taken place. Aum Shinrikyo was the first terrorist group to attempt to kill using anthrax, but had not taken a single life with the disease.

Nevertheless, the event sent shockwaves around the world and caused people in many countries to wonder if their own borders harbored people with the capacity and desire to cause such mass casualties. For the U.S. that question was answered only a single month later when, on April 19, 1995,



anti-government extremists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols used a fertilizer bomb to destroy the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and injuring hundreds more. It was the worst terrorist act up to that point in U.S. history.

What was more, Americans soon realized that McVeigh and Nichols **were hardly alone. In the early to mid-1990s the extreme right in the U.S. experienced a major resurgence. Not only were many older groups such as neo-Nazis given new energy, but entirely new movements emerged, such as the militia movement and the common law court movement. McVeigh and Nichols used conventional explosives to perpetrate their terrorist act but perhaps the next Timothy McVeigh would use nerve gas or plague or anthrax.**

The combination of the Aum Shinrikyo incident and the Oklahoma City bombing heightened U.S. concern over biological and chemical agents to new levels, a concern that rhetoric soon reflected. "To build a really devastating anthrax weapon," one defense expert told a Pittsburgh newspaper, "takes less money and skill than the Oklahoma City bomb...A fertilizer bomb kills by the hundreds. A biological weapon kills by the tens of thousands." The Tokyo gas attack was a "wake-up call," according to Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre, "to us and the entire world, that people in the future are going to use these rather terrible weapons in ways that potentially just bring an entire city to its knees." In late 1995, Dr. Gordon C. Oehler, Director of the CIA's Nonproliferation Center, testified to Congress that "extremist groups worldwide are increasingly learning how to manufacture chemical and biological agents, and the potential for additional chemical and biological attacks by such groups continues to grow."

Such statements were often accompanied by extreme scenarios. The Office of Technology Assessment issued a report in 1993 suggesting that a small plane flying over Washington D.C. could use 100kg of anthrax and a crop sprayer to kill up to three million people. A few years later, in 1997, Secretary of Defense William Cohen held up a five-pound bag of sugar at a press conference to illustrate how little anthrax would be needed to devastate Washington, D.C. Richard Preston, who had written a sensationalistic book on the Ebola virus and a 1997 novel, *The Cobra Event*, about a



bioterrorism event in New York City, grew to stature high enough to address Congress on the subject in 1998.

### **The Harris Hoax**

The Tokyo gas attack and the Oklahoma City bombing were not enough by themselves to increase American anxiety over anthrax to its highest level. That would be accomplished in large part by one man, **Larry Wayne Harris**.

Harris, who lived in Lancaster, Ohio (a distant suburb of Columbus), was an unambiguous extremist with an unhealthy fixation on biological weapons. An adherent of the racist and anti-Semitic religious sect Christian Identity, which teaches that white people are descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel and that Jews are descended from Satan, Harris was also a member of the neo-Nazi group Aryan Nations. Harris was not simply ideologically extreme; he also had concocted a fantasy world for himself in which he was a former CIA operative who had scientifically proven the existence of God and who had learned from an Iraqi college student of secret Iraqi government plans to devastate the U.S. with anthrax and bubonic plague.

Harris became fixated on this purported biological attack from Iraq; he decided to write a book teaching people how to protect themselves against threats such as anthrax. He also decided to begin conducting experiments on bubonic plague and to this end in May 1995 obtained some samples of (inert) bubonic plague from a Maryland company, which he put in the glove compartment of his car. Suspicious health officials notified federal authorities, however, who rushed to arrest him—only to discover that it was not illegal to possess bubonic plague. Harris was able to plead to a single count of wire fraud (for falsifying information on his original request) and received only probation.

Coming on the heels of the Tokyo gas attack and the Oklahoma City bombing, this rather minor event received disproportionate attention by the media and by the government, too, which could now point to Larry Wayne Harris as an example of the dangers that Americans faced from biological warfare. In 1998, FBI director Louis Freeh told a Senate subcommittee that Harris had been convicted, "interestingly enough," on a fraud charge rather than



possession of a weapon of mass destruction, but asserted in the same testimony that "he was going to use that against somebody."

But if the FBI could profit from Harris's newfound notoriety, Harris himself was not particularly unhappy with the results himself. Harris self-published his book on defense against biological warfare, *Biological Warfare: A Major Threat to North America*, and began promoting it on extremist shortwave radio programs and in extremist publications. He was now regularly billed as a "biological warfare expert," and appeared at right-wing gatherings and survivalist expositions. Harris's suggestions for defending oneself against anthrax consisted of urging that people dose themselves with quantities of antibiotics such as tetracycline in order to build up resistance; a theory that was unorthodox at best and caused various militia and "patriot" figures to speak out against him. Bad publicity, whether in the mainstream press or the "patriot" press, did little to deter Harris from pursuing his interests in biological agents.

These interests led Harris eventually to his second arrest and the media circus that followed it. Harris developed an association with William Job, Leavitt, Jr., a Nevada fire extinguisher manufacturer who had an interest in pseudoscience. They met at an alternative science conference, following which Leavitt hired Harris to help him test a device offered to him by pseudoscience researcher named Ronald Rockwell. This device, the "AZ58 ray tube," allegedly could kill bacteria through frequency vibrations; Leavitt had visions of manufacturing and selling the invention. Harris told Leavitt that he could test the device on anthrax; he even boasted of having "military grade" anthrax that could, he alleged, wipe out a city. Harris did not, however, have any such substance at all—he simply had some anthrax vaccine, which is harmless.

Rockwell, however, contacted the FBI on February 18, 1998, and informed them that Harris supposedly had anthrax. Rockwell, an ex-con, may have been genuinely concerned, or he may have been trying to retaliate against Harris, thinking that his deal was not likely to be accepted. In any case, by that evening, the FBI had initiated close surveillance of Leavitt and Harris, tracking them by helicopters and closing in with a SWAT team. They soon arrested the pair, charging them with



conspiracy to possess and possession of a biological agent.

FBI Special Agent in Charge Bobby Siller told a news conference that there was no indication that the men had any target and that no one in the Las Vegas area was in any danger ("In the few days it took to test the substance...the media entered the throes of sensational ecstasy," one Las Vegas newspaper reporter remembered several years later). However, despite Siller's efforts, the arrest nevertheless turned into a media spectacle. A comment in an FBI affidavit which described Harris talking at an event the previous year about a biological attack on New York City and the consequences it would have become construed somehow as evidence of an actual and credible plot by Harris to attack New York. Tabloids carried headlines such as "SUBWAY PLAGUE TERROR" and "FEDS NAB 2 IN TOXIC TERROR."

While scientists at Ft. Detrick, Maryland, tested the samples seized from Harris, the FBI raided his home, leaving no stone unturned in a search for anthrax. It did not find any; moreover, the Army eventually revealed that the alleged anthrax was in fact harmless vaccine. Because there was no agent and no plot or intention to use an agent, the case fell apart. Leavitt was released, while Harris was extradited to Ohio, where prosecutors were prepared to argue that he had violated the terms of his probation. In the end, all charges were dropped and Harris returned to his Lancaster home.

**The intense publicity surrounding Larry Wayne Harris's second arrest moved anthrax anxiety from the halls of Congress and the cubicles of bioterrorism experts to the living rooms and kitchens of all Americans. The discovery that Harris had no actual anthrax did nothing to stem the tide of media and government publicity given to anthrax during the spring and summer of 1998.**

Both the specter of Harris as a potential bioterrorist and the immediacy and severity of the federal government's response telegraphed to all Americans the deadliness and seriousness of anthrax.

**The Harris spectacle sent another message, too, one that was received only by certain individuals and groups with malicious tendencies. This message was: If you want to cause a panic, do it with anthrax. The main consequence**



**of the second Harris arrest was a wave of malicious anthrax hoaxes that began in 1998.**

### **Anthrax Hoaxes: 1998-1999**

The total number of anthrax hoaxes probably cannot be accurately measured, but they numbered well over a hundred during the peak period of October 1998 through February 1999. It was a vicious cycle. The media duly reported on each event, causing more anxiety and more hoaxes, especially in Southern California, where for some reason the hoaxes really caught on.

In April 1997, an anthrax hoax was directed at the international headquarters of B'nai B'rith, the well-known Jewish organization, in Washington, D.C. B'nai B'rith received an envelope in the mail that contained a petri dish with an unknown substance and a letter that contained rambling statements aimed at Jewish liberalism and the Jewish community, as well as a reference to anthrax. The letter purported to be from the "Counter Holocaust Lobbyists of Hillel." The reaction by police was swift but harsh: four B'nai B'rith employees were taken outside, stripped to their underwear, and decontaminated with a bleach-water spray in full public view in front of photographers. Meanwhile, more than 100 other employees were quarantined in the building for eight hours until authorities decided the substance was not dangerous (since anthrax is not contagious but can be inhaled in enclosed spaces, this measure was certainly misguided, as it potentially increased the employees' risk). A few months later, an anonymous source sent a fax to a variety of news organizations around the country, warning that terrorists planned to poison urban water supplies with botulism and anthrax, causing anxiety in several cities.

In March 1998, a collection agency in Phoenix received an anthrax threat by mail, resulting in the quarantining of ten people and the evacuation of several buildings (a Maricopa County public health biologist expressed doubt that anthrax attacks could even be carried out through the mail, because whoever contaminated such a letter would contaminate him or herself, as well as the post office where it was mailed; "If we see a bunch of postal workers suddenly sick in the next couple of days, we'll know," he said). The perpetrator was later discovered and arrested.



Meanwhile, in Texas authorities discovered a rented vehicle with a canister inside that was marked "anthrax." It was not long before the floodgates were opened. In August, authorities in Wichita, Kansas, had to evacuate a state office building after someone left an envelope in a stairwell, along with a note claiming the building had been contaminated by anthrax. The perpetrator of the Kansas incident then sent a demand letter to fringe radio personality Art Bell in Nevada that contained anti-government rhetoric and demanded money. Both letters claimed to be from the "Brothers for the Freedom of America" and the "Christian Identity Movement." In October, a Denver-area family received an envelope with a towellette and a note claiming anthrax contamination. By the end of the month, abortion clinics in a number of states in the Midwest had begun to receive anthrax threats with Cincinnati postmarks.

**Victims of anthrax hoaxes, both during the 1998-1999 episodes and again in 2001, have tended to fall into four categories:**

*1. Government Employees, Agencies and Buildings*

Such threats have been directed against state, local, and federal buildings in many different areas of the country. In Calabasas, California, a telephoned anthrax threat in December 1998 caused 90 people to be temporarily quarantined. Later that same month, an employee at the federal building in Rochester, New York, had to undergo decontamination procedures after opening a letter with an anthrax threat. Two weeks later, the Tualatin City Hall in Tualatin, Oregon, had to be shut down for two days because of an anthrax threat.

The main post office in Columbus, Georgia, received a letter in February 1999 telling employees that they had been exposed to anthrax; meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., authorities had to respond to packages allegedly containing anthrax that had been sent to the Washington Post building and the Old Executive Office Building. Five days later, the State Department received an anthrax letter. The likelihood that some of these and other anthrax threats directed against governmental targets were ideologically motivated is high.



## 2. *Abortion Clinics*

Soon after the tactic of anthrax hoaxes emerged, extreme opponents of abortion seized upon the measure as a way to interfere with the operation of abortion clinics and to harass, humiliate, and intimidate workers and patients. When workers at an Indianapolis Planned Parenthood clinic opened a powder-filled envelope allegedly containing anthrax, emergency crews shut down the clinic, set up a tent outside, then stripped and scrubbed employees and patients (as well as firefighters, police officers, and one postal worker). The perpetrator targeted at least nine abortion clinics in four states with this hoax.

A January 2000 report from the Feminist Majority Foundation, which tracks abortion-related violence, revealed that 39 abortion clinics nationwide received anthrax threats in 1999, with the majority of such incidents occurring in the Midwest and Northeast. Many of these threats came in February 1999, when 30 clinics received envelopes bearing a Lexington, Kentucky, postmark.

Overall, the number of hoaxes in 2000 declined from 1999, but still affected 7 percent of all abortion clinics. In the first two weeks of January 2000, more than 30 clinics in 22 states received anthrax threats, all of them located in the eastern half of the U.S. The nature of the anti-abortion anthrax threats, especially their precise geographical targeting (against the eastern half of the U.S.), suggests a conscious campaign by a dedicated group of extremists rather than a collection of copycat incidents. The threats also provoked one wave of reactive counter-threats (directed against Catholic institutions and a few anti-abortion activists).

## 3. *Schools*

Most anthrax threats involving schools have been malicious pranks rather than being ideologically inspired. Such threats have disrupted school settings and caused considerable harassment and embarrassment to teachers and students because of the decontamination procedures conducted by emergency crews, often with little regard for the dignity of potential victims. In December 1998, for instance, a mailed anthrax threat to a Riverside, California, school district building caused authorities to quarantine, then decontaminate 21



people (including a postal worker and two firefighters), in a tent set up outside the building. "It was the most humiliating thing I've ever been through," school superintendent Antonio Arredondo, Jr., told reporters. "I had to strip down naked, and they sprayed all of us down with a bleach solution and then hosed us down with water afterward." That was the third hoax in Riverside County in as many months.

Threats against schools were common, and for the most part were probably a direct result of the media attention given to anthrax. In Anaheim, California, an anthrax threat at a high school caused a quarantine of students and teachers for three hours in January 1999; two weeks later in Newfane, New York, a high school had to be closed for a day while hazmat teams were called in (a student was later arrested for this incident). Anthrax threats against schools occurred in all parts of the country; in some areas they were part of a series of anthrax threats made against a variety of local targets. In Buffalo, New York, for example, a series of threats occurred in February 1999 against the town hall, the town library, and various schools. One school threat shut the institution down for ten and a half hours.

#### *4. Other Threats*

The total number of threats made was truly high and encompassed a bewildering array of victims, some of whom were surely targeted at random or because of personal grudges on the part of the perpetrators. A few examples illustrate the range of such incidents, as well as the anxiety and personal frustrations that they routinely caused. In Palm Desert, California, in December 1999, 200 shoppers were hosed down with bleach after an anthrax threat at a department store. Five days later in La Quinta, California, hundreds of Wal-Mart customers were evacuated and detained after an anthrax threat.

That same month in Pomona, California, nearly 800 people were quarantined for hours in a nightclub following an anthrax hoax. In January 1999, anthrax hoax victims in California alone included a car dealership in Los Angeles, a Target department store in Cathedral City, a pizza restaurant in Palm Desert, and a hospital in Los Angeles, among many other targets. It is difficult to comprehend the fear induced in customers who one minute were going about their business



and the next minute forced to strip down in a public parking lot to be hosed off with bleach and put in a "decontamination suit."

**The period 1995-2000 resulted in America inadvertently telegraphing to the entire world, as well as to dissidents and malcontents within its own borders, how vulnerable the American psyche was to the threat of anthrax, to say nothing of the American critical infrastructure**

### **The 2001 Outbreak: New Hoaxes and Public Anxiety**

Although the anthrax hoaxes peaked in 1998-1999, they never entirely disappeared, as the abortion clinic incidents illustrate. The government emphasis on the extreme threat of anthrax terrorism coupled with the intense media coverage of events like the Larry Wayne Harris arrests and the anthrax hoaxes themselves created an intense national anxiety about biological warfare that culminated with the October 2001 national anthrax crisis.

The crisis began in Boca Raton, Florida, where Robert Stevens, a 63-year old photo editor for a tabloid newspaper, was admitted to the hospital in early October and later diagnosed with inhalation anthrax. He died on October 5. Three days later officials announced that Ernesto Blanco, a 73-year old mailroom employee in the building, had anthrax spores in his nasal passages. Moreover, spores had been found on Stevens' computer keyboard. On October 10, a third person was hospitalized and the case became a federal criminal investigation.

With startling rapidity, anthrax contaminated letters then showed up in Washington, D.C., and New York City, with political leaders and media figures being the primary targets. Postal workers in facilities that had handled anthrax-contaminated letters began testing positive for—and dying of—the disease.

**Almost as soon as the anthrax incidents began occurring, a second wave of anthrax hoaxes commenced.** The victims in this second wave were much the same as in the first: government buildings, abortion clinics, schools, and a variety of miscellaneous targets. Some of the hoaxes, such as the abortion clinic hoaxes, gave every indication of being as



planned and as purposeful as those in the first wave. Others have been opportunistic or impulsive. One example is the disturbing case of a Los Angeles fire captain arrested for sending a threatening letter with a suspicious powder to a law firm that had represented his ex-wife during their divorce (the letter did not use the word 'anthrax'). Only weeks before, the captain had served with a crisis intervention team at the World Trade Center following the September 11 terrorist attacks.

The perpetrator or perpetrators at this point of the actual anthrax incidents are completely unknown (as is the identity of most of the hoaxers). The main lines of speculation point fingers at international terrorists on the one hand and domestic extremists on the other. At first, "expert" speculation concentrated on possible international connections, not surprising in light of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the trauma they are still causing, as well as the puzzling coincidence involving the wife of an employee at the Boca Raton building attacked by anthrax who brokered rental apartments for two of the September 11 hijackers.

More recently, perhaps simply because of a lack of additional clues or evidence, speculation is leaning toward a domestic source. However, the possibility of a non-ideological criminal perpetrator cannot be ignored, either.

**Though the *identity* of the perpetrator remains unknown, the *intent* seems to be much clearer. America's first anthrax terrorist event was designed to cause terror, not mass casualties.** An anonymous figure mailed anthrax-laden letters to several strategically selected destinations. This is a poor way to cause mass casualties: the number of people likely to be exposed to the agent is limited; the recipient has every chance of becoming suspicious of the letter and not opening it in the first place; and an envelope containing anthrax is probably most likely to cause cutaneous anthrax, the most diagnosable and treatable form of the disease. The perpetrator may or may not have thought about the possibility that spores might leak through the envelopes and contaminate the postal system.

The fact remains that the anthrax incidents so far have not caused mass casualties.



What these incidents *have* caused, and what it seems certain that they were intended to cause, is panic and fear. In every city and town across the country, frightened citizens have contacted public health authorities and law enforcement about suspicious powders they have seen, including sometimes items such as spilled laundry detergent found in their own homes. Some municipalities have experienced hundreds of calls. Many citizens are afraid to open the mail at work or at home, even though the possibility that someone may have mailed them anthrax remains overwhelmingly low.

The result of the recent incidents, as well as the attendant hoaxes, which provide a "force multiplier" effect, is that **Americans are being targeted with a particular terrorist tactic precisely because in recent years the nation demonstrated that it is uniquely vulnerable to such an attack.** The nation was vulnerable not in terms of critical infrastructure or public health infrastructure, but rather psychologically. Regardless of whether the perpetrator will turn out to be linked to international terrorism, to a domestic anti-government or hate group, or to an unaffiliated psychopath, constituents of all three categories can hardly help but have noticed our continued vulnerability in this area.

