

US anthrax attacks linked to army biological weapons plant

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The anthrax spores enclosed in envelopes mailed to two leading Senate Democrats in October are biologically identical to bacteria secretly manufactured at a US germ warfare facility during the last decade, according to press reports and an analysis by a leading microbiologist.

The army biological and chemical warfare unit at the Dugway Proving Ground, about 80 miles southwest of Salt Lake City, Utah, may well be the source of the weapons-grade anthrax sent to Senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy. Scientists at Dugway grew and processed spores deriving from the Ames strain—the strain that appeared in all the letters sent to media outlets and Congress.

The spores had been carefully milled to produce the size most effective in spreading the deadly bacteria, between one and three microns.

The existence of the secret army program was first revealed by the *Baltimore Sun* in an article published December 12. Until then, US officials, including those investigating the anthrax attacks, had maintained that the American military stopped producing germ warfare materials in the late 1960s, before the signing of an international treaty banning the development of such weapons.

Pentagon spokesmen now claim that the development of weapons-grade anthrax was legal under the treaty because the production of small quantities is permitted for “peaceful and protective” purposes, i.e., to prepare countermeasures to a germ warfare attack. The United States is the only country that is known to have produced weapons-grade anthrax in the past 25 years.

While the Dugway facility produced the dried anthrax spores, they were sometimes sent to another germ warfare unit at Fort Detrick, near Frederick, Maryland, only 30 miles from Washington, DC. Fort Detrick has equipment for killing bacteria with radiation, and received shipments of the anthrax to be sterilized so it would be safer to work on. The most recent shipment from Dugway to Fort Detrick was last June 27, the *Sun* reported. The spores were returned to Dugway on September 4, one week before the terrorist

attacks in New York City and Washington, and four weeks before the first anthrax cases were detected in south Florida.

Spores were also sent in 1997 to the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Washington, according to a spokesman for that agency.

Even before the *Sun*’s report confirmed that the Dugway lab had recently produced weapons-grade anthrax, a leading specialist on the subject had concluded that a US government facility was the most likely source of the anthrax used in the recent mailings. In an analysis released December 10 by the Federation of American Scientists’ Working Group on Biological Weapons, Barbara Hatch Rosenberg declared, “The anthrax in the letters was probably made and weaponized in a US government or contractor lab. It might have been made recently by the perpetrator on his own, or made as part of the US biodefense program; or it may be a remnant of the US biological weapons program before Nixon terminated the program in 1969.”

Another expert in the field, Richard Spertzel, a former army colonel who directed the UN biological weapons inspection team in Iraq, also rejected the notion that a disaffected individual like the Unabomber could have produced the anthrax letters. In testimony to the House Committee on International Relations December 5, Spertzel declared, “The quality of the product contained in the letter to Senator Daschle was better than that found in the Soviet, US or Iraqi program, certainly in terms of the purity and concentration of spore particles.”

In response to the *Baltimore Sun* article, a spokesman for the Dugway Proving Ground confirmed that the facility had produced dry anthrax powder similar to that found in the Daschle and Leahy letters, but claimed that it was “well protected” and entirely accounted for. The statement was the first admission by the US government that it has produced useable germ warfare material since the program for offensive biological weapons was terminated in 1969 by the Nixon administration.

Barbara Hatch Rosenberg said, “This is very significant.

There's never been an acknowledgement that any US facility had weaponized anthrax. The question is, could someone have gotten hold of a very small amount and used it in the letters?"

According to the *Washington Post*, the FBI is investigating a possible connection between the anthrax attacks and Dugway, and has questioned lab personnel. Fort Detrick is also a possible source, and the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) is the principal source of the Ames strain of anthrax, supplying it not only to a handful medical researchers in the US, but to germ warfare research facilities in Canada and Great Britain as well.

The *Post* reported November 30, "Since the mid-1980s, the US Army laboratory that is the main custodian of the virulent strain of anthrax used in the recent terrorist attacks distributed the bacteria to just five labs in the United States, Canada and England, according to government documents and interviews."

The most recent transfers took place only a few months before this autumn's anthrax attacks—the Ames strain was sent in March to the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center in Albuquerque, and in May to the Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, Ohio, a private company involved in anthrax vaccine research.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, federal investigators have concluded that the anthrax spores in the Daschle and Leahy letters could only have been produced in a government weapons laboratory, probably one run by the American government. The anthrax in these letters contained as many as one trillion spores per gram, a concentration sufficient to cause the death of half the American population if widely distributed.

The *Times* observed, citing an unnamed federal science adviser, that the quality of the anthrax "lends credence to the idea that someone with links to military laboratories or their contractors might be behind the attacks." The scientist told the *Times*, "It's frightening to think that one of our own scientists could have done something like this. But it's definitely possible."

The revelations about the production of weapons-grade anthrax at Dugway and the distribution of the Ames strain from Fort Detrick have aroused concerns among the relatively small group of scientists familiar with the most up-to-date research in the field. Several expressed surprise, in comments to the press, about the ongoing germ warfare program. Barbara Hatch Rosenberg categorically declared that the Dugway activities were a violation of international treaty obligations in relation to germ warfare.

The *Washington Post*, in a front-page report December 16, cited these experts as concluding: "Genetic fingerprinting studies indicate that the anthrax spores mailed to Capitol Hill

are identical to stocks of the deadly bacteria maintained by the US Army since 1980." At least one of the scientists told the *Post* that "the original source" of the anthrax in the Daschle and Leahy letters "had to have been USAMRIID," i.e., Fort Detrick.

The *Post* added: "The FBI's investigation into the anthrax attacks is increasingly focusing on whether US government bioweapons research programs, including one conducted by the CIA, may have been the source of deadly anthrax powder sent through the mail, according to sources with knowledge of the probe. The results of the genetic tests strengthen that possibility. The FBI is focusing on a contractor that worked with the CIA, one source said."

The genetic fingerprinting finding was made by a research team led by geneticist Paul Keim at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, the newspaper said, adding that the FBI had begun interviewing CIA officials responsible for the CIA's own germ warfare program, which made use of the Ames strain.

The *Post* added that both profit and politics were being considered as possible factors in the anthrax letters: "Investigators are considering a wide range of possible motives for the anthrax attacks, including vengeance of some sort, profiteering by someone involved in the anthrax cleanup business, or perhaps an effort by someone to cast blame on Iraq..."

While this new direction in the investigation is well known in official Washington, neither the Bush administration nor the major television networks have focused any public attention on the growing likelihood that a section of the state apparatus itself, with close links to far-right elements, is the probable source of the anthrax attacks.



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