

FBI knows anthrax mailer but won't make an arrest, US scientist charges

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25 February 2002

A leading US expert on biological warfare said the FBI had identified the perpetrator of last fall's anthrax attacks on the congressional Democratic leadership and other targets, but was "dragging its feet" in making an arrest and pressing charges, for fear that secret government activities would be exposed.

Barbara Hatch Rosenberg, director of the Chemical and Biological Weapons Program for the Federation of American Scientists, an independent, non-governmental professional group, made the charge in a speech February 18 at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.

She said the FBI had known since last October the identity of the person who mailed lethal quantities of anthrax in letters to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, Senator Patrick Leahy, and several media outlets. Sources she described as "government insiders" told her the individual in question had been interrogated several times, but not arrested.

At least five anthrax-laced letters were mailed last fall, causing five deaths and several more serious illnesses. Three of them, with a weaker variety of the bacteria, went to the publisher of the *Star* tabloid, the *New York Post*, and NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw. Two more, with extremely powerful doses, went to Daschle and Leahy.

As microbiologists have more carefully studied the anthrax in the Daschle and Leahy letters, they have remarked on the purity and potency of the spores. It has become clear that only a small number of people, those with both the necessary scientific knowledge and access to government stocks of anthrax developed for bacteriological weapons, could have carried out the attack.

According to an account in the *Trenton Times*,

Rosenberg told her Princeton audience that the suspect was likely to be a scientist who formerly worked at the US government's main biological warfare laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland, near Frederick, about 40 miles northwest of Washington DC.

In response to a question as to whether the knowledge required to produce the anthrax was widespread among scientists at major drug and chemical companies, Rosenberg said this conception was refuted by a careful examination of the letters to Capitol Hill. "I think that the results of the analyses show that access to classified information was essential," she said, "and that rules out most of the people in the pharmaceutical industry."

The extreme toxicity of the anthrax spores suggests that the attacker not only had experience in handling anthrax in a military setting, but had been vaccinated and received annual booster shots, and had access to classified information about how to treat the spores chemically so they would spread through the air without clumping together.

"We can draw a likely portrait of the perpetrator as a former Fort Detrick scientist who is now working for a contractor in the Washington, DC area," Rosenberg said. "He had reason for travel to Florida, New Jersey and the United Kingdom.... There is also the likelihood the perpetrator made the anthrax himself. He grew it, probably on a solid medium and weaponized it at a private location where he had accumulated the equipment and the material.

"We know that the FBI is looking at this person, and it's likely that he participated in the past in secret activities that the government would not like to see disclosed," Rosenberg said. "And this raises the question of whether the FBI may be dragging its feet somewhat and may not be so anxious to bring to public light the person who did this.

“I know that there are insiders, working for the government, who know this person and who are worried that it could happen that some kind of quiet deal is made so that he just disappears from view,” Rosenberg said.

“I hope that doesn’t happen, and that is my motivation to continue to follow this and to try to encourage press coverage and pressure on the FBI to follow up and publicly prosecute the perpetrator.”

Rosenberg also expressed the belief that the Bush administration refused last summer to sign an international biological weapons treaty banning germ warfare weapons because of ongoing secret research and development of such weapons.

The issues raised by Rosenberg are of extraordinary significance. They suggest that the FBI is not only refusing to carry out a serious investigation into the anthrax attacks, but lying to the American public about its efforts. Two weeks before Rosenberg’s speech, the FBI held a press conference in the Trenton area to announce it was doubling to \$2.5 million the reward for information leading to the arrest of those responsible. The FBI also sent out an e-mail to 40,000 microbiologists appealing for their assistance in the investigation.

FBI sources told the *New York Times* that they had made little headway in the investigation and had no firm suspects, according to a report published in the *Times* January 23. But by Rosenberg’s account, the FBI has long known who mailed the spores, and has interviewed the individual several times.

A similar piece of disinformation appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* February 12. The newspaper reported, citing FBI sources, that the anthrax investigation was now centered on US military labs, beginning with Ft. Detrick and Dugway, Utah. But again, the investigation was presented as painstaking and thorough, with very few positive leads.

Further evidence of the FBI’s lack of interest comes from Canadian anthrax researchers. Bush administration officials have suggested, in recent press interviews, that a vigorous effort is under way to identify the exact source of the anthrax used in the Leahy letter by comparing it genetically to varieties of the Ames strain of anthrax distributed to labs in North America and Britain. But according to Bill Kournikakis, a biologist at the Defense Research

Establishment in Suffield, Alberta, “We have never been contacted by any law enforcement agency with regard to our Ames strain.”

One additional fact points to the conclusion that someone connected to Ft. Detrick is responsible for the anthrax attacks. An anonymous letter was sent to a US marine base in late September, after the anthrax letters were posted but before any cases were diagnosed or the attack publicized, declaring that an Egyptian-American scientist, Ayaad Assaad, was a bioterrorist. Assaad was laid off from Ft. Detrick in 1997. He later charged that his dismissal involved racial prejudice and harassment. He has been cleared of any role in the anthrax mailings.

The timing of the denunciation—after the September 11 terrorist attacks but before the anthrax letters became publicly known—suggests that the anonymous accuser was the person who mailed the anthrax letters. The attacker sought to accuse an Arab-American of the crime in order to throw investigators off his trail, just as he used Islamic fundamentalist language in the anthrax letters themselves. The attacker must have been familiar enough with Ft. Detrick to know that Assaad would be a potential target for such a frame-up.



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