

Anthrax attacks: FBI cover-up and New York Times whitewash

Patrick Martin
15 May 2002

A new genetic analysis of the anthrax used in last fall's terrorist attacks has pinpointed the source as the US government's own germ warfare program. This finding explodes the pretense, long maintained by the Bush administration and parroted by the media, that little is known in the investigation into the attacks, which killed five people and disrupted the lives of millions.

As few as 20 scientists may have had the combination of technical knowledge and access to secret anthrax stocks—maintained illegally by the US government in violation of international treaty obligations—required to perpetrate the attacks. Yet the FBI continues to claim that it has made no progress in the investigation and that no suspects are being actively targeted.

This cover-up has a clear political motivation: either the perpetrator is an individual with powerful friends in high places in the Bush administration, whose influence is stalling the probe, or the perpetrator is actually a US government agency—in which case the anthrax mailings to two top Senate Democrats constitute an attempted political coup against the official opposition party.

In testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee May 8, FBI Director Robert Mueller relegated the anthrax probe to a single paragraph. But Mueller was already in possession of the results of the genetic analysis, conducted by geneticists Timothy Read and Clare Fraser of The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR) and Paul Keim of Northern Arizona University. The study was delivered to the FBI two weeks ago, but held back from publication in the journal *Science* until Thursday, May 9, the day after Mueller's appearance before the congressional committee.

The study confirms, on the basis of DNA analysis, what has been widely suspected: the anthrax spores mailed to three media outlets and the offices of two

Senate Democrats, Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy, were derived genetically from the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) at Fort Detrick, Maryland, the center of US germ warfare experimentation.

The three scientists suggest that new, more detailed genetic comparisons may narrow down the source of the anthrax spores to a just one of the 15 to 20 government and private laboratories involved in work on the Ames strain of anthrax. All derive their stocks of the deadly bacteria from Fort Detrick.

Moreover, by measuring minute differences due to mutation in the genetic structure of the mailed spores, compared to spores that never left Fort Detrick, it should be possible to determine how long ago the anthrax used in the terrorist letters left the US government facility. This would aid the investigation in honing in on the source of the attacks.

While the genetic evidence lays out a virtual blueprint for the investigation into the anthrax attacks, there are more accounts of foot-dragging by the US government. ABC News reported April 4 that US military and intelligence agencies have refused to provide the FBI with a full listing of the secret facilities and employees working on anthrax projects. The *Los Angeles Times*, in an article April 21, cited criticism by scientists of an FBI email sent to the 32,000 members of the American Society for Microbiology three months after the attacks, seeking cooperation in the probe. "They wonder why the FBI outreach came so late, and so broadly, when the number of scientists with expertise and access to anthrax materials is probably closer to 200," the newspaper said.

Perhaps the most politically significant response to the new study came in the form of an editorial in the *New York Times* May 11, headlined, "The Deepening

Anthrax Mystery.” Published in the leading US newspaper, this commentary deliberately distorts the evidence brought to light so far, in order to cover up for the FBI’s stalling on the probe. It is a matter not so much of “mystery” as of mystification.

The editorial cites the progress made by the genetic researchers, but adds, “for now the goal of identifying where the anthrax came from and who might have sent it through the mails remains as elusive as ever.” But as the *Washington Post* wrote, in its news article on the latest genetic analysis: “it is now indisputable the mailed microbes are direct descendants of the germs developed at Fort Detrick.”

In other words, the first question, where the anthrax came from, has been definitively answered. The attack on two leading Democratic senators used biological warfare material from American military stockpiles, a fact of profound political significance.

The *New York Times* editorial claims, “the universe of potential suspects seems to be growing. Although investigators once hoped to narrow the list to a few dozen suspects or less, lately they seem to be acknowledging that hundreds or even thousands of individuals, in this country and abroad, are probably capable of making the substance that was mailed, provided they could gain access to the needed germs.”

On the contrary, the genetic analysis has already made it possible to narrow down the number of possible targets to a relatively small number, according to scientists knowledgeable in the field. Biological warfare expert Steven Block of Stanford University told the *Dallas Morning News*, in an interview published April 1, that no more than 250 people in the US had the knowledge required to make the attacks. Another expert, Barbara Hatch Rosenberg of the Federation of American Scientists, has put the number at no more than 20, when factors like access to classified information and germ warfare materials are considered.

Block suggested a political reason for the FBI’s delaying the investigation. The perpetrators of the attack “either had to have information from the United States or maybe they were the United States,” he said. The FBI also might be holding back “because the person that’s involved with it may have secret information that the United States government would not like to have divulged.”

Cramming even more disinformation into a few paragraphs, the *Times* editorial concludes: “The FBI remains convinced that the attacks were carried out by an American with scientific training, not by Al Qaeda or a rogue nation, but critics fear the bureau is so wedded to this theory that it has become blind to other possibilities.”

Here the *Times* echoes the campaign being waged by the *Wall Street Journal*, the leading organ for the US extreme right, whose answer to every social, political and foreign policy problem is the same: launch an American war against Iraq. For obvious political reasons the *Journal* has vehemently opposed suggestions that the anthrax attacks were launched by right-wing elements within the United States, preferring to blame Iraq despite the lack of any evidence.

The *Times* editorial directly contradicts its own reporting on the anthrax investigation. Only two months ago, on February 25, a *Times* article noted: “The Federal Bureau of Investigation has identified a ‘short list’ of 18 to 20 people who had the means, opportunity and possible motive to have sent the anthrax-laden letters last fall, law enforcement officials said.

“Officials said the list was compiled mostly through tips from scientists and an analysis by investigators of people with skills to have made the highly concentrated anthrax spores that killed five people and prompted doctors to prescribe antibiotic treatment for 30,000 people.”

The February 25 article noted the widely reported statement of White House press spokesman Ari Fleischer, who denied claims that the FBI had identified a chief suspect, saying, “unfortunately, there are still several suspects.” The FBI, he said, has not “narrowed it down to just one.” This White House statement clearly implied that, far from a list of thousands of potential suspects, federal investigators were focused on a core group of suspects. Yet two months later, the *Times* claims “the universe of potential suspects appears to be growing.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact