

Why the low-key White House, media response to pipe-bomb terrorism?

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Luke John Helder, a 21-year-old college student, was arrested Monday outside Reno, Nevada after a four-day spree in which he planted 18 pipe bombs, all but one in rural mailboxes. He began in Illinois, a few hours' drive from his apartment in Menomonie, Wisconsin, and proceeded through Iowa, Nebraska, Colorado, with an apparent side trip to Amarillo, Texas, before crossing Utah and Nevada.

The arrest was more the product of Helder's own brazenness than of any special police effort. His father, Cameron Helder, a construction worker in Pine Island, Minnesota, became alarmed by a letter from his son that he received after the bombings began, and called the police. Helder's college roommate also called to report finding black powder and pieces of pipe in the room they shared near the University of Wisconsin-Stout, a branch campus of the state university.

Helder sent a signed six-page letter to the *Badger Herald*, the daily newspaper for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the main campus, outlining his motivation for the attacks and promising more of them. Six people were injured in the explosions, four of them rural letter carriers who picked up the bombs from mailboxes thinking they were collecting packages for mailing.

On Monday evening Helder made a cell phone call from Utah that revealed his location to the authorities. (The phone call raises questions about whether the Amarillo bombing was a copycat attack, since it would have been difficult for Helder to drive from Utah to Texas and then back to Nevada in the time available.)

On Tuesday morning, the FBI identified Helder in connection with the case and broadcast an appeal for him to turn himself in. Shortly afterwards, a passing motorist reportedly spotted a car answering the FBI's description and notified the agency. FBI and Nevada

state police pursued Helder at high speed, while contacting him on his cell phone through his father. The youth initially threatened to kill himself, but eventually surrendered.

According to an affidavit filed the next day with the US District Court in Reno, Helder has admitted to making eight pipe bombs in his Wisconsin apartment, and 16 more at a motel outside Omaha, Nebraska, and planting all 18 that were found in a five-state area.

Remarkably, Helder was stopped three times by police during his four-day, 3,000-mile trek, twice for speeding and once for not wearing a seatbelt. Each time he was released without incident to continue planting bombs.

On the second day, May 4, Helder was stopped 12 miles outside of Albion, Nebraska, where a pipe bomb had been found in a mailbox. When police approached the car, Helder told them "I didn't mean to hurt anybody." The police told him he had been stopped for speeding, ticketed him, and allowed him to proceed.

As expressed in his letter to the *Badger Herald*, Helder's confused views somewhat resemble those of Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, who espoused a fascistic outlook centered on opposition to modern technology and economic development. Helder denounced the government from the standpoint of individual rebellion, asking, "When 1 percent of the nation controls 99 percent of the nation's total wealth, is it a wonder why there are control problems?"

The college student combined hostility to technology and "greed" with a mélange of mystical and New Age views—he described death as an "illusion" and expressed interest in "astral projection," for instance. All his letters included threats of suicide. Helder now faces criminal charges in five states that could put him in prison for the rest of his life.

A fan of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain, who died a suicide in 1994, Helder was once a member of a local grunge-metal band. He used the e-mail screen name “dirdjew” on the group’s web site, suggesting he shared the anti-Semitism that is a hallmark of right-wing militia groups in the US Midwest and Northwest.

One can only imagine the media firestorm and menacing pronouncements from Washington if Helder had been an Arab immigrant instead of a 21-year-old from small-town Minnesota, espousing “anti-government” rhetoric very similar to that of the right wing of the Republican Party.

The media reaction has been extremely mild, especially given the sensational nature of the crimes being committed. Once Helder was identified and arrested, the *Washington Post* described him as a “troubled 21-year-old art student” (no such characterization was made of any of the September 11 hijackers). The *New York Times* reported that no one was seriously injured in the explosions, although at least one letter carrier lost his hearing, and others had serious lacerations to the arms or face.

There were no nationally televised White House press conferences or nationwide alerts from the Office of Homeland Security. Tom Ridge, who heads the Bush administration’s domestic anti-terrorism campaign, did not even issue a statement on the case.

If Luke John Helder had been Iraqi, American warplanes would likely be on their way to Baghdad. But Helder did not fit with the Bush administration’s political agenda. Like Timothy McVeigh and Ted Kaczyinski, he is a homegrown product of the social and political crisis in the United States.



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