

Who is stonewalling the US anthrax investigation?

Patrick Martin
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Two commentaries by *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, published July 12 and July 19, raise further questions about the refusal of the FBI and the Bush administration to take any action against the most likely suspect in the anthrax terrorist attacks that killed five people last fall. These columns—and the near-universal silence in the rest of the media—underscore the high-level complicity in the suppression of any serious investigation into the terrorist attacks that targeted two leading Democratic senators.

Kristof has previously singled out the suspect, whom he gave the pseudonym “Mr. Z,” and asked why the FBI was so reluctant to arrest him. The multiple details about this individual—training in the Army Green Berets, involvement in counterinsurgency operations in Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, past employment at the US biological warfare lab at Ft. Detrick, Maryland—indicate that the allegations relate to Dr. Steven Hatfill, a former Army bio-weapons scientist whose home has been searched several times by the FBI, and who has been named in other press accounts of the case.

In the July 12 column, Kristof suggests that the attacker had a pattern of activity involving false threats of anthrax aimed at promoting media and government interest in countermeasures to deal with biological terrorism.

On April 24, 1997, an anthrax hoax letter was received at the Washington headquarters of the B’nai B’rith. It contained a gelatin-like substance purporting to be wet anthrax. In actuality it was a closely related but non-toxic chemical. According to Kristof, “Mr. Z” wrote a letter to the organizer of a terrorism seminar in Washington, held the same day as the B’nai B’rith attack, complaining that neither he nor any other anthrax expert had been invited.

A second anthrax hoax in February 1999 was more ambitious, involving envelopes to the *Washington Post*, NBC’s Atlanta office, a post office in Columbus, Georgia, near the Ft. Benning army base, and the Old Executive Office Building in Washington. The lettering and language patterns in the Columbus letter—the only one Kristof was able to examine—resembled those in last fall’s attacks.

Significantly, the 1999 letters contained a dried powder rather than a wet substance, a shift that corresponded to the work history of “Mr. Z.” According to Kristof, the suspect’s 1999 résumé adds something missing from the 1997 version: “working knowledge of wet and dry BW [biological warfare] agents, large-scale production of bacterial, rickettsial and viral BW pathogens and toxins.”

Kristof says that two document consultants hired for the current anthrax investigation have never been shown the older hoax letters for comparison purposes. Furthermore, he suggests that the licked stamps on the 1999 envelopes have not been checked for DNA, which could identify the sender.

The writer’s July 19 column cites hundreds of pages of internal Army documents, first discovered by the *Hartford Courant*, which report widespread security lapses at the Ft. Detrick lab over a 10-year period, with significant quantities of Ebola virus, hantavirus, anthrax and other pathogens missing from inventory, and little checking of what researchers were taking out of the complex.

So slipshod were the practices at Ft. Detrick that after a visit last April by Senator Mary Landrieu, a Louisiana Democrat, anthrax spores were found in a hallway and an administrative area. Kristof concludes, “Anthrax spores seem to have it in for Democratic senators.”

This is an oblique reference to the most significant

aspect of the anthrax terrorist attacks: the obvious political motivation, as the deadly bacteria were sent to the Democratic Party leader in the US Senate, Tom Daschle, and to the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Democrat Patrick Leahy.

While maintaining a public silence on the anthrax case, the two senators have requested private briefings from the FBI. *Newsweek* magazine reported in its July 15 issue that FBI officials have been called twice in recent weeks to discuss the investigation behind closed doors at the US Senate. One meeting was with staffers for Leahy, the other with Daschle personally.

Newsweek said that both senators raised issues sparked by criticism of the investigation on the part of Barbara Rosenberg of the Federation of American Scientists. Five months before Kristof's columns, Rosenberg released a lengthy memorandum giving details of the chief suspect, declaring that his name had been given to the FBI within days of the attacks, and charging that the bureau was dragging its feet in the probe for fear of exposing illegal biological weapons research by the US government.

In place of a serious investigation, the FBI has mounted an elaborate charade. While only 50 scientists employed or formerly employed at Ft. Detrick are believed to have the necessary combination of skill and access to have carried out the attacks, the FBI has enlisted dozens of field offices and hundreds of investigators, interviewed 5,000 people, issued 1,700 subpoenas, administered hundreds of lie detector tests and created over a hundred separate databases. The inquiry is the second largest currently mounted by the agency, after the equally fruitless investigation into the September 11 suicide hijackings.

While the agency sent out letters to 20,000 microbiologists asking for their cooperation in the probe, it did not even open the Leahy anthrax letter for two months, did not collect anthrax strains from government and university labs until five months had passed, and still has not completed elementary forensic tests. This pretended probe is a cover for the high-level protection being accorded the principal terror suspect.

Just how high this protection goes is not clear. But a very suggestive fact was uncovered last month in the course of a lawsuit filed by the right-wing Judicial Watch group, seeking documents on the anthrax attacks under the Freedom of Information Act. Judicial Watch

charged, and the White House has now confirmed, that the anti-anthrax drug Cipro was distributed to White House staffers on September 11, nearly four weeks before the first anthrax attack was made public.

Larry Klayman of Judicial Watch said, in a press statement, "We believe that the White House knew or had reason to know that an anthrax attack was imminent or underway." White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said that the drug had been distributed "in the early hours of September 11," before the exact nature of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington had become clear.

These revelations paint a far different picture of life in official Washington than one finds in typical media accounts of legislative jousting or positioning for election contests in 2002 or 2004. Top Democratic Party leaders are aware that they were targeted for assassination by a former special forces operative with close ties to the military and intelligence apparatus, a man whose identity is known but who for some reason cannot be arrested. They are told that the FBI is deliberately stalling the probe, while the Bush administration pretends that it has no suspects and little information about the attacks. Yet the leaders of the official political opposition say nothing publicly about what amounts to an attempted political coup d'état, and a compliant media sustains the cover-up.



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