

One year since the anthrax attacks on the US Congress

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The Bush administration and the American media have passed by the anniversary of the anthrax attacks on leading congressional Democrats in virtual silence. There has been little media commentary assessing the meaning of the attempt to kill Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, whose offices were targeted with letters filled with trillions of lethal anthrax spores that could have killed dozens, if not hundreds, of people.

The mailings to Daschle and Leahy followed a series of mailings of less potent anthrax spores to media outlets—a tabloid office in Florida, the *New York Post*, and NBC News. The Democrats and the media are habitual targets of the ultra-right in the United States. But both federal investigators and the media itself have been largely silent about the likelihood of a right-wing political motivation for the anthrax attacks.

Nor has the media spotlight been placed on the manifest failure of federal investigators to apprehend the person or persons responsible for the attacks, which killed five people and caused serious and potentially disabling illness in a dozen others. Once it became clear, within a few days of the attack, that the most likely suspects were fascist-minded elements in the US military-intelligence establishment, not terrorists affiliated with Al Qaeda or Iraq, the FBI effectively shoved its investigation onto the back burner.

According to scientists who have discussed the investigation with the press, there are extraordinary delays and unexplained wrong turns in the FBI investigation:

- * The FBI could have identified the institutions that possessed the Ames strain of anthrax used in the attacks with a routine database search. But subpoenas for samples of the bacteria were not sent out until February, four months after the attacks.

- * Receipt of the samples was delayed by another two to four months because no proper storage room had been prepared at the Ft. Detrick Army germ warfare lab, which was to test them.

- * Investigators did not locate the contaminated mailbox in Princeton, New Jersey, where the anthrax letters were likely mailed from, until August, ten months after the attacks. Testing of the 600 mailboxes on that postal route should have taken only two weeks, one expert said.

- * Investigators waited until September 2002, 11 months later,

to conduct exhaustive environmental testing at the Florida tabloid newspaper building where the first person to die of anthrax, photo editor Robert Stevens, worked.

- * Investigators have still not spoken with all of the US scientists who made anthrax for the military's biological weapons program in the 1950s and 1960s, although only two dozen are still alive. None were interviewed until months after the attacks.

Strangest of all, of course, is the treatment of Dr. Steven Hatfill, whose name was reportedly provided to the FBI within a few days of the anthrax attacks. Hatfill had a grievance against the government because his security clearance was revoked in August 2001, ultimately costing him his job at defense contractor SAIC. He was, according to his own resume, familiar with both dry and wet forms of the anthrax toxin. He had written a novel about a germ warfare attack on the US Congress, and commissioned a study of the threat of anthrax-laced letters that included information on the best size of particles and kinds of envelopes.

Although Hatfill had opportunity, motive and the necessary skills, and reportedly failed several lie detector tests, he was never arrested or detained. His name only came to public attention after a campaign of exposure by Barbara Hatch Rosenberg, a bioweapons expert at the Federation of American Scientists, and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof.

Rosenberg charged that Hatfill was being given high-level protection by the government because of his involvement in top secret germ warfare projects. "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," she wrote. "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."

Kristof detailed Hatfill's role as a military/intelligence operative for white racist-ruled Rhodesia and South Africa. He suggested that Hatfill—whom he initially called "Mr. Z.", in deference to the government's refusal to name him—was still on active duty for the US government in operations in Central Asia.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* commented at the time: "Kristof's central accusation is that the anthrax investigation

has reached a dead end, not because of the lack of evidence, but because the prime suspect has powerful friends in high places and enjoys official protection....Kristof's column points inexorably to the conclusion that the Bush administration is an accessory after the fact—if not before it—in the attempted assassination of the official political opposition.”

Neither Rosenberg nor Kristof provided definitive proof that Hatfill was the anthrax terrorist. But they detailed circumstantial evidence that was far more convincing than the vague suspicions, or racist innuendo, used by the Justice Department in its roundup of thousands of Arab and Muslim immigrants after the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Justice Department's reluctance to move against Hatfill was in sharp contrast to the agency's practice in other terrorist investigations. If the prime suspect in the anthrax case had been a Muslim—or even better, an Iraqi—Attorney General John Ashcroft would likely have designated him an “enemy combatant” and had him locked up indefinitely.

That Hatfill had—and still enjoys—high-level protection is demonstrated by political associations that came to light after the FBI was compelled to move more openly against him. After the third search of Hatfill's Frederick, Maryland apartment, the Justice Department sent a letter to Louisiana State University to forbid the school to hire Hatfill as a \$150,000 deputy director of the National Center for Biomedical Research and Training, an LSU lab financed by the federal government.

Hatfill fought back, holding a public press conference at which he denied any connection to the anthrax attacks. He has rallied sections of the ultra-right to his defense. His press spokesman and close friend, Pat Clawson, is a former CNN journalist who now works on the radio talk show of right-wing activist and Iran-Contra plotter Oliver North. The right-wing propaganda outfit Accuracy in Media hosted his press conferences and published statements denouncing the alleged FBI “persecution.” Senator Charles Grassley, an Iowa Republican, raised the issue in the Senate Judiciary Committee and wrote a letter of protest to Ashcroft, declaring, ““ It is important that the government act according to laws, rules, policies, and procedures, rather than make arbitrary decisions that affect individual citizens.”

Perhaps the most significant intervention came from the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, which denounced Rosenberg and Kristof for pressuring the FBI, and declared that the real culprit in the anthrax attacks was Iraq.

On October 9, the *Baltimore Sun*—one of the few daily newspapers to pursue the anthrax issue seriously—published a report claiming that Hatfill had lied repeatedly about his educational and employment record, including forging a bogus certificate for a Ph.D. from Rhodes University that he had not received.

Again, the double standard is staggering. Muslim and Arab immigrants were seized by federal authorities and detained indefinitely for missing deadlines for submitting routine

paperwork that would never have been the occasion for arrest or prosecution before September 11.

The anthrax attacks had extraordinary political significance. Daschle and Leahy are among the highest-ranking leaders of the official opposition party in Washington. Daschle is Senate majority leader, the top Democrat in Congress, while Leahy's committee handles such politically sensitive issues as the confirmation of judicial nominees and legislation on abortion, criminal justice and civil rights.

During the first several days after an anthrax-laced letter was opened October 15, 2001 by a Daschle aide, sending spores into the ventilation system of the office building, the entire building had to be closed and cleaned, putting dozens of senators into temporary accommodations for several months. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted to adjourn indefinitely, and Senate Republican leader Trent Lott initially proposed that the Senate do likewise.

There is a curious coincidence between what Lott proposed and the decision by the Bush administration after the September 11 terrorist attacks to establish a shadow government in secret bunkers which would provide continuity in the event of a nuclear/chemical/biological attack that destroyed Washington DC. The shadow government was also limited to the executive branch, making no provision for the safeguarding or reconstitution of an elected legislature.

The political consequences of the anthrax terrorism and the Bush administration's plans for a shadow government dovetailed completely. Both would have shut down the legislative branch and left the executive branch with virtually unrestricted power.

It was revealed last December that the anthrax spores in the Daschle and Leahy letters were genetically identical to those produced at US germ warfare facilities at Ft. Detrick, Maryland and Dugway, Utah. In other words, the Democratic Party leadership was targeted for assassination using weapons produced by (or stolen from) the American military itself. The whole affair exudes the stench of an attempted political coup.



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