

The JFK “plot”: another grossly inflated threat

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The weekend’s news in the US was dominated by screaming headlines and sensationalist broadcast coverage of an alleged plot in New York to blow up John F. Kennedy International Airport’s jet fuel tanks and supply lines. The attack would have been, according to many accounts, “more devastating than September 11.”

Four men were charged in an indictment [<http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/nye/pr/2007/Defreitas.complaint.pdf>] unveiled Sunday that included features that have become almost invariable in every such “terror” case brought by the government in recent years. First, the suspects had not only carried out no acts of terror, but they apparently lacked any means to realize such an attack. Second, a central figure in the alleged plot was a paid undercover informant of the FBI.

Broadcast networks spoke of the worst threat since the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, while reporters were sent out to conduct random interviews with passengers passing through JFK as well as residents living near the pipelines, asking how they felt about their supposed near brush with death.

As usual, New York City’s tabloids excelled in this sensationalism. Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post* Sunday referred to the alleged plot in its headline as an “inferno plan” and carried an editorial stating that the purported plan “to do calamitous damage to JFK International Airport and surrounding residential neighborhoods underscores yet again the overarching threat Islamist terrorism poses to America.”

The *New York Daily News* on Monday carried five pages on the “plot,” with a ludicrous front-page headline, “Evil Ate at Table Eight,” promoting an inside interview with the Brooklyn waitress who served a meal to Russell Defreitas, whom the paper describes as the “mastermind” of the alleged plot, just before he was picked up by federal agents and police.

Yet the profile of Defreitas, a 63-year-old US citizen who emigrated from Guyana 25 years ago, hardly suggests a terrorist “mastermind.” A former friend describes him as

someone who, before becoming a Muslim, had declared himself a Rastafarian and grown dreadlocks. He recalled his involvement in various business schemes to ship air conditioners or refrigerators to Guyana, none of which ever came to anything.

“He couldn’t even fix brakes,” the former friend said. “He never built bombs.”

Other accounts described him as a retired worker living in an impoverished Brooklyn neighborhood, who on various occasions had been homeless. *New York Newsday*, for example, reported, “Since being laid off from his job as a cargo worker several years ago, Russell Defreitas has lived a meek existence—at times sleeping in trains and trying to eke out a living running two-bit scams, selling incense on street corners and collecting welfare, acquaintances said.”

Also charged in the indictment are Abdul Kadir, a citizen of Guyana and former member of the Guyanese Parliament, and Kareem Ibrahim, a citizen of Trinidad, both of whom are under arrest in Trinidad awaiting a hearing on a US extradition request. Lawyers for the two said that they would fight extradition, likely raising the US record of torturing terrorism suspects. A fourth defendant, Abdel Nur, also a citizen of Guyana, has yet to be arrested.

A key figure in the alleged plot, however, is named in the indictment only as “the source.” He is identified as a convicted drug trafficker who, in exchange for favorable consideration on a pending jail sentence as well as cash payments, agreed to infiltrate the supposed terrorist cell.

Much of the evidence contained in the indictment consists of recordings of conversations between “the source” and the defendants. What emerges clearly, however, is the leading role this “informant” played in the alleged plot. Defreitas is quoted as saying that they saw him as someone “sent by Allah” to lead them.

The indictment also refers to meetings and recorded conversations between both Defreitas and the source and individuals in Guyana, who are identified only as “Individuals A through F.”

These six unnamed men are quoted proposing a wide

range of terrorist activity, including smuggling “mujahideen from Asia into Guyana and then into the United States,” blowing up US helicopters at the Guyanese airport and the plan to blow up the JFK fuel system. On this last proposal, these unnamed individuals also suggest the use of dynamite and chemical explosives and advise on how to obtain these materials. One of these individuals also proposes that the plotters seek the assistance of a Trinidadian Islamist group, Jamaat al Muslimeen. In the account of these conversations, Defreitas is not quoted as saying anything.

The obvious question is why these six unnamed “individuals” have not been charged. One likely explanation is that they too were, in one form or another, participants in an elaborate effort to ensnare a hapless and sometimes homeless retiree and others in a plot that was fundamentally staged by the US government for its own purposes.

The blood-curdling accounts in the media largely reflected the highly charged language of US prosecutors and police officials in presenting the indictment. Roslynn Mauskopf, the US attorney in Brooklyn, New York, in announcing the charges, said, “Had the plot been carried out, it could have resulted in unfathomable damage, deaths and destruction.” She added, “The devastation that would be caused had this plot succeeded is just unthinkable.”

The words “unfathomable” and “unthinkable” were undoubtedly chosen carefully, as the type of chain reaction of explosions described in the indictment was quite simply impossible.

Both airport security officials and pipeline experts dismissed the allegedly catastrophic disaster that supposedly would have been triggered by blowing up a fuel pipeline or storage tanks. While the federal indictment suggested that such an explosion could travel along the pipelines linking tanks in Linden, New Jersey into Brooklyn, New York and across the borough of Queens, this is impossible, both because the pipelines are equipped with safety valves that shut off the flow of fuel in event of a leak and because there is inadequate oxygen inside the pipes to sustain a fire.

The *New York Times*, whose skepticism about the federal indictment was clearly signaled by the newspaper placing stories on the JFK “plot” on its Metro pages, quoted Neal Sonnett, a defense lawyer and former federal prosecutor, as saying, “There unfortunately has been a tendency to shout too loudly about such cases.”

The *Times* article went on to say that Sonnett, also a former president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, “noted that there is a broader risk in overstating the sophistication of a terror plot. At a time when many Americans live in justified fear of an attack, the risk is that drumbeating creates a climate of fear and drives public policy.”

There is every reason to believe that the succession of “terror” cases, each one weaker than the last and virtually all of them driven by “informants” who seem to play more the role of agents provocateur, are aimed at achieving precisely this effect. They serve as a means of intimidating public opinion with fear, justifying attacks on democratic rights and diverting attention from the ongoing debacle in Iraq.

The problem faced by the government is that the public is growing increasingly skeptical about these cases, with a sizeable portion of the population having concluded that they are trumped up for political purposes.

Under these conditions, the danger is that those who now control the reins of power in Washington may be concluding that something more tangible is needed.

On the same day that the alleged JFK “terror plot” broke in the news, the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* published a revealing interview with that state’s new Republican Party chairman, who described himself as “150 percent for Bush.”

“At the end of the day,” said state party chairman Dennis Milligan, the owner of a water treatment business, “I believe fully the president is doing the right thing, and I think all we need is some attacks on American soil like we had on [Sept. 11, 2001], and the naysayers will come around very quickly...”

The question is whether elements in the Bush administration are reaching similar conclusions and preparing to engineer or allow another round of terrorist attacks “on American soil” as a pretext for suppressing the overwhelming popular opposition to its policies.



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