

New York “terror” arrests: another government-orchestrated plot

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In a high-publicity “terror” arrest, authorities seized four men in New York City May 20, alleging they intended to blow up synagogues in the Bronx and shoot down jets near the US Air National Guard Base in Newburgh, New York. The evidence against the men was marshaled by a paid government informant, who authorities admit spent nearly a year attempting to convince the men to carry out such attacks and provided them with phony weaponry.

The arrested are four impoverished African-American men from nearby Newburgh, New York. All had previously converted to Islam, at least two while in prison. They are James Cromitie—whom police describe as the ringleader—David Williams, Onta Williams and Laguerre Payen, a Haitian immigrant. The four are charged with conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction and conspiracy to acquire and use anti-aircraft missiles.

Authorities claim that the men were arrested after they planted what the agent-provocateur told them were bombs outside of the Riverdale Jewish Center. The bombs, which were obtained by the informant, were fakes.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) also claims that the men acquired phony Stinger missiles through the informant, which they purportedly planned to launch at US military planes flying in and out of Stewart International Airport, a small regional airport serving Newburgh, a depressed industrial city of 60,000 residents about 60 miles north of New York City.

According to New York Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly, the men planned to leave bombs in front of the two Bronx synagogues, and then return by car to Newburgh to detonate the explosives via cell phone. They then intended to launch an attack on the Newburgh air base, Kelly asserted.

After the men supposedly placed the phony bombs, police rushed their vehicle, smashing their windows and arresting them. The arrests, carried out by the New York Police Department (NYPD), had the trappings of a well-rehearsed military exercise. The action included an 18-wheel police

vehicle and an armored personnel carrier, and involved personnel from the NYPD Emergency Service Unit.

The case is the latest in a string of “terror” cases in which the federal government, to great media fanfare, announces that it has cracked a major plot based on evidence gathered from paid informants. In spite of spending billions of dollars and trampling over basic civil liberties—for example wire-tapping the phone conversations of millions—the massive US government “anti-terror” operation has not so far generated one credible case.

Yet courts have consistently handed down guilty convictions based on the work of the agent provocateurs. The cases have included those against five men charged with plotting to kill soldiers at Fort Dix in New Jersey, a Pakistani immigrant accused of conspiracy to plant a bomb in New York City, and five Haitian immigrants recently convicted—after two mistrials—who allegedly told paid agents they wished to blow up the Sears Tower in Chicago.

According to a *New York Times* report, the paid government informant spent months recruiting from among the young Muslim men of Newburgh for the plot. He offered jobs, money, cars, cell phones, and computers. “It’s easy to influence someone with the dollar, especially these guys coming out of prison,” a member of the mosque noted.

According to a source close to the case, the informant’s name is Shahed Hussain. It was also Hussain who provided the crucial evidence used to charge two Albany, New York, Muslims with conspiracy to assist terrorism in 2004. The two men were charged and ultimately convicted of helping Hussain launder money in a missile sale designed to assist in the assassination of a Pakistani diplomat. Hussain has been a government informant since 2002, when he was arrested for illegally accepting money in exchange for providing drivers’ licenses.

Prior to recruiting the men at the mosque in Newburgh, Hussain spent months in a similar effort at a nearby mosque in Wappingers Falls, New York. The imam of the Newburgh mosque told the *Times* that he and other members of his mosque suspected Hussain, who introduced himself as

Maqsood, was a government agent. He thought of reporting his activities. But, he asked, “How do you go to the government about the government?”

A lawyer representing Cromitie, Vincent L. Briccetti, said of Hussain, “His history is of interest to us.”

In the Albany case, it emerged in trial testimony that Hussain’s every step was overseen by the FBI. This makes the timing of the New York City arrests troubling. Hussain, acting on orders from the FBI, told the men to plant the bombs on May 20. The following day President Barack Obama and Vice President Dick Cheney held back-to-back press conferences to debate the administration’s handling of the war on terror in the midst of a bitter struggle within the political elite over whether to openly repudiate the Constitution in the name of “national defense.”

Politicians were quick to seize on the arrest. Republican Representative Peter King of New York told Fox News that the transfer of “detainees” from the Guantánamo Bay prison camp, which Obama has slated for closure, would result in more “domestic” terrorists. “And now if you’re bringing hundreds of prisoners from Guantánamo who are very ideologically trained, that will add to it,” he said. “And I can tell you, going back several years, whether it’s California or New York, there’s a real concern about these house conversions because they often become the most radical.”

For its part, the media accepted government claims at face value, treating the episode as a near catastrophe, and dutifully splashing the variations of the phrase “terror plot thwarted” all over the airwaves and newsprint.

New York City’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg—also a media mogul—was particularly shameless. “This latest attempt to attack our freedoms shows that the homeland security threats against New York City are sadly all too real and underscores why we must remain vigilant in our efforts to prevent terrorism,” he said.

Democratic Senator Charles Schumer stated, “if there can be any good news from this terror scare it’s that this group was relatively unsophisticated, infiltrated early, and not connected to another terrorist group.”

Rep. King, a Republican from Long Island, called the government-orchestrated plot “a very serious threat that could have cost many, many lives if it had gone through”—if the government had provided real weapons?—“It would have been a horrible, damaging tragedy.”

Politicians also focused on the threat posed by “domestic” terrorists. Rep. King warned “there’s a real threat from homegrown terrorists and also from jailhouse converts,” and Sen. Schumer said the “incident shows that we must always be vigilant against terrorism—foreign or domestic.”

Democratic Representative Eliot Engel of New York added, “The initial reports that we’re getting [are] that these

alleged terrorists were converted to radical Islam in jails. I think we need to look at that as a problem as well if jails are going to become a breeding ground for people to convert to any kind of radical Islam.”

At most—and there is no reason to treat the government’s claims with any confidence—the men were hapless victims of a government plot that capitalized on the confused social anger felt by the most impoverished and desperate sections of the population. Initial reports make clear that the four would have been incapable of carrying out any sort of terror plot on their own.

James Cromitie, 44, has already spent 12 years of his life behind bars, “most recently for selling drugs to undercover officers behind a school.” In an evident bid to boost what police call his “terror cred,” Cromitie falsely told the informant that his parents once lived in Afghanistan. In the police complaint, Cromitie is described as being angered over the US occupation of Afghanistan and saying he wanted to “do something to America.”

David Williams, 28, had recently “started to read the Koran on slow nights at his steakhouse job.” Williams has a seven-year-old daughter and a newborn son. He had recently moved to Newburgh from New York City, where he studied computer science, to assist his mother with a younger brother who was dying of cancer.

Onta Williams, 32, told the informant that because the US government is “killing Muslim brothers and sisters in Muslim countries...if we kill them here with I.E.D.’s and Stingers, it is equal.”

Laguette Payen, 27, an immigrant from Haiti, faced deportation last year until a federal judge ruled he was mentally unfit. He has been hospitalized since the arrest, and is reputed to suffer from schizophrenia.



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