Many unanswered questions as FBI closes anthrax case

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On Friday, February 19, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation officially closed the case of the 2001 mailings of lethal anthrax. FBI officials said that Bruce Ivins, an anthrax specialist at the US Army biological warfare center in Frederick, Maryland, was the sole person responsible for the attacks, which killed five people in September and October of 2001.

Ivins committed suicide in July 2008, shortly after he was identified as the principal target of the lengthy investigation. He left no suicide note, and many friends and former co-workers have vehemently denied that he could have been the anthrax mailer.

Together with announcing the end of the anthrax investigation, the FBI released thousands of pages of documents relating to the case, many of which provide further substantiation of the case against Ivins. Two facts appear indisputable: that Ivins created and had primary access to the particular strain of anthrax used in the mailings; and that he was a deeply disturbed individual who was seen (many years later) engaging in some of the specific behaviors associated with the anthrax mailer, such as traveling long distances late at night to place anonymous packages in the mail.

The timing and circumstances of the closure of the case sparked criticism. New Jersey Democratic Congressman Rush Holt, whose district includes Princeton, where the anthrax mailings were believed to originate, pointed out that the case against Ivins was purely circumstantial. “Arbitrarily closing the case on a Friday afternoon should not mean the end of this investigation,” he said. “The evidence the FBI produced would not, I think, stand up in court.”

There are many unanswered questions in the anthrax investigation, but they do not primarily relate to the question of Ivins’ guilt. His role as a key player seems established, but the closing of the official probe ends any possibility that the FBI will identify any other individuals or organizations that either facilitated or directed his activities. Ivins will be classified as a Lee Harvey Oswald-style “lone gunman,” and that will be the official verdict.

More importantly, the major political questions surrounding the anthrax attacks remain to be addressed. Whoever was responsible, the attacks were used to channel the popular revulsion over the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in a new direction: behind the Bush administration’s already drafted plans for an American invasion and conquest of Iraq.

It requires a distinct mental effort to think back to the circumstances that prevailed in September and October 2001, when anthrax-laced letters, accompanied by crudely block-printed imprecations against Israel and the United States, and praise for Allah, arrived at media and congressional offices along the eastern seaboard.

The media campaign over the anthrax mailings was a key point of connection between the 9/11 attacks and the program of militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home. There were repeated suggestions in the course of those months that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had been responsible for the anthrax attacks.

Two claims in particular were the most significant: the claim that the anthrax in the letters was particularly lethal because it had been “weaponized,” hence requiring the resources of a government, not a lone wolf terrorist; and the claim that the anthrax had been mixed with bentonite, a chemical used to make the particles more mobile.

The suggestion of “weapons-grade” anthrax was originally made by Congressman Richard Gephardt, then the House Minority Leader, who a year later would be the leading congressional Democratic supporter of the US invasion of Iraq. It was widely circulated in the media, and continues to be a staple of the ultra-right press, appearing most recently in an op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal* last month.

As an article February 22 in *USA Today* explained,

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however, the claim that the anthrax had been "weaponized" using silica has been thoroughly debunked in an electron microscope study by researcher Joseph Michael of Sandia National Laboratory in New Mexico, which found that silicon occurred naturally in the anthrax spores and had not been added through a sophisticated manufacturing process.

The bentonite claim was even more sensational, since, according to US officials, that chemical process for treating anthrax had only been used in Iraq, so the presence of bentonite would amount to Saddam's signature on the anthrax attacks.

ABC News made the bentonite claim in a broadcast of World News Tonight on October 26, 2001, in which correspondent Brian Ross and anchorman Peter Jennings repeatedly declared that there was now compelling evidence of Iraqi responsibility for the anthrax attacks. Ross claimed that "three well-placed but separate sources", later increased to four, had confirmed the detection of bentonite in the anthrax mailings.

This episode has been exhaustively documented by liberal blogger and Salon.com contributor Glenn Greenwald, who ultimately extracted an admission from ABC—six years later—that no bentonite had ever been detected. In other words, either three (or four) highly placed US government sources leaked the same lie to ABC, planning to use it in the Iraq campaign, or ABC was itself party to the fabrication of the war propaganda.

As Greenwald notes, if the sources for the bentonite fabrication really were well-placed, "one would presume that meant they had some connection to the laboratory where the tests were conducted—Ft. Detrick. That means that the same Government lab where the anthrax attacks themselves came from was the same place where the false reports originated that blamed those attacks on Iraq."

It thus appears that the US government officials who sought to manipulate the media coverage on the anthrax attacks had the same perspective as that of the anthrax mailer himself, who sought to throw suspicion on Al Qaeda, Iraq or Arabs in general through his references to Allah and denunciations of Israel in the letters that accompanied the anthrax powder.

There is another, equally significant, unresolved political question arising from the anthrax case. The selection of the targets suggests a definite political agenda on the part of the mailer. Anthrax-laced envelopes were sent to three media offices and to the offices of two prominent Senate Democrats, then-Majority Leader Thomas Daschle, and Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

The allegedly "liberal" media and leading congressional Democrats were and are among the principal targets of the US ultra-right. Saddam Hussein was indifferent to such distinctions, and Al Qaeda terrorist attacks have generally targeted symbols of the American government as a whole (embassies, the Pentagon) or the corporate elite (the World Trade Center).

Daschle and other leading congressional Democrats undoubtedly know more than they have publicly revealed about the anti-democratic measures that were under discussion in Washington in the fall of 2001. Consider, for instance, the remarks made by Leahy in 2007 to the Vermont Daily Briefing, a local news outlet in his state (and publicized by Greenwald on his blog):

Leahy: What I want to know—I have a theory. But what I want to know is why me, why Tom Daschle, why Tom Brokaw?

VDB: Right. That all fits into the profile of a kind of hard-core and obviously insane ideologue on the far Right, somebody who would fixate on especially Tom Daschle, who at that point was the target of daily, vitriolic attacks on Right-wing talk radio.

Leahy: I don't think it's somebody insane. I'd accept everything else you said. But I don't think it's somebody insane. And I think there are people within our government—certainly from the source of it—who know where it came from. And these people may not have had anything to do with it, but they certainly know where it came from.

It is worth recalling that among the first responses to the anthrax mailings was a proposal by leading congressional Republicans to shut down Congress (on security grounds), a move that would have left the Bush administration in uncontested control of government policy.

And it was in the midst of the anthrax mailings to the leading congressional Democrats that the Bush administration drafted and rammed through Congress the USA Patriot Act, its sweeping legislation attacking democratic rights at home. The congressional Democrats embraced the legislation, with only a single "no" vote in the Senate.

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