

Mississippi man arrested in ricin mailings to officials

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A 45-year-old Mississippi man was arrested Wednesday and arraigned Thursday in federal district court on charges of threatening to harm President Obama and at least one US senator.

Paul Kevin Curtis was arrested early Wednesday evening, after letters allegedly carrying ricin poison arrived at Washington mail processing centers serving the White House and the Capitol.

Curtis was reportedly a frequent writer of hostile letters to the office of US Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi, a Republican. When the suspected ricin letter arrived at a mail sorting center in Landover, Maryland, addressed to Wicker, and signed “I am KC and I approve this message,” Wicker’s staff quickly identified Curtis as a correspondent with those initials.

The letters to Obama and Wicker had no return address and were postmarked Memphis, Tennessee, the nearest large city to Curtis’s home in Corinth, a small town in the northeastern corner of Mississippi. Both letters contained an oily substance now being tested, accompanied by the same eight-line message, including the couplet, “Maybe I have your attention now / Even if that means someone must die.”

Press reports said a third, similar letter was sent to a local judge, 80-year-old Lee County Justice Court Judge Sadie Holland, the mother of a Democratic state legislator. Holland opened the letter herself, found the substance, which is also being tested, but has not shown any symptoms of exposure to any poison.

The two letters arrived at postal facilities in the Washington area Tuesday and were identified as suspicious overnight. This led to scenes of near-lockdown on Capitol Hill Wednesday, as the offices of at least five senators—Democrats Carl Levin of Michigan and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, and Republicans Wicker, Jeff Flake of Arizona and Richard

Shelby of Alabama—reported suspicious envelopes arriving at either Washington or home-state offices. Except for Wicker’s, all these envelopes turned out to be innocuous.

Capitol Hill police confined thousands of staff aides to their offices for several hours, and there was a mobilization of heavily armed men in the blocks around the congressional office buildings.

The alleged ricin letter to Obama was intercepted at a mail-sorting facility in Anacostia, in southwest Washington DC, miles from the White House. The FBI said in a statement that it contained “a granular substance that preliminarily tested positive for ricin.” However, the statement went on to acknowledge that this preliminary result required confirmation through a more sophisticated lab testing that could take 24 to 48 hours.

Curtis’s political views are unclear, but press reports suggest that he had expressed sympathy with a number of conspiracy theories, claiming to have been fired from a hospital job more than a decade ago because he had found body parts in a refrigerator there.

An Internet posting by Curtis described “countless court battles, cops harassing me weekly, death threats, personal & financial losses, several thefts, my home burned down, car exploded, marriage dissolved & bankruptcy.”

Curtis reportedly contacted Wicker’s office several times in an effort to get him to intercede on his behalf. One section of the letter sent to Wicker and Obama contains this expression of frustration: “No one listened to me before. This must stop. To see a wrong and not expose it is to become a silent partner to its continuance.”

His principal occupation in recent years was as an Elvis Presley impersonator, and he also reportedly

dressed up and performed at weddings and parties as Buddy Holly, Kid Rock and other popular singers. Another online posting contained this self-description: “Father/Activist/Singer/Songwriter/Business Owner/Rebel.”

Whatever his feelings of persecution, Curtis had no known contact with police agencies until this week, when the full force of federal, state and local government was mobilized against him.

Among the agencies contributing to his arrest, according to one listing were the following: the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Forces in Memphis, Tenn., and Jackson, Miss., cooperated with the U.S. Capitol Police; the U.S. Postal Inspection Service; the U.S. Secret Service, the Lee County (Miss.) Sheriff’s Office; the Prentiss County (Miss.) Sheriff’s Office; the Corinth (Miss.) Police Department; the Booneville (Miss.) Police Department; the Tupelo (Miss.) Police Department; the Mississippi National Guard 47th Civil Support Team; and the Mississippi Office of Homeland Security.



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