

CRACKERS AND CASTOR BEANS: FBI BUSTS WANNABE RICIN WMD “TERRORISTS” IN GEORGIA

Almost as if in response to Marcy’s noting less than two weeks ago that at least in Detroit the FBI overlooks white terrorists when profiling, the FBI yesterday announced the arrests of four individuals in Georgia accused of planning attacks using explosives, a silencer and the biological agent ricin:

Frederick Thomas, 73, of Cleveland, Ga.; Dan Roberts, 67, of Toccoa, Ga.; Ray H. Adams, 65, of Toccoa; and Samuel J. Crump, 68, of Toccoa, were arrested today relating to plans to obtain an unregistered explosive device and silencer and to manufacture the biological toxin ricin for use in attacks against other U.S. citizens and government personnel and officials.

The “attack” planned with ricin is laughable on its face:

The complaints charge that during the investigation of Thomas and Roberts, Roberts described another individual named “Sammy” who, according to Roberts, had manufactured the biological toxin, ricin, and had access to the beans used to make ricin. During one of the group’s meetings in September, which was recorded by the confidential source, Crump arrived and said that he would like to make 10 pounds of ricin and disperse it in various United States cities, including Atlanta. Crump described a scenario for dispersing the ricin in Atlanta in which the toxin

would be blown from a car traveling on the interstates. Crump allegedly also said that he possessed the ingredient used to make the toxin and cautioned the source about the dangers of handling it.

Ricin is indeed highly toxic and can be deadly in very small amounts. However, the prospect of delivering a lethal dose of the toxin to anyone by releasing it while driving along an interstate seems extremely unlikely to be effective. As described in the CDC document, ricin powder, which was the planned form to be used, is not particularly toxic on contact with skin and does not transport readily across skin despite many references to keeping it off skin in the conversations reported in an affidavit from the case posted by MSNBC (pdf). Instead, ricin has to be eaten or inhaled to be toxic:

- *Inhalation: Within a few hours of inhaling significant amounts of ricin, the likely symptoms would be respiratory distress (difficulty breathing), fever, cough, nausea, and tightness in the chest. Heavy sweating may follow as well as fluid building up in the lungs (pulmonary edema). This would make breathing even more difficult, and the skin might turn blue. Excess fluid in the lungs would be diagnosed by x-ray or by listening*

to the chest with a stethoscope. Finally, low blood pressure and respiratory failure may occur, leading to death. In cases of known exposure to ricin, people having respiratory symptoms that started within 12 hours of inhaling ricin should seek medical care.

- *Ingestion: If someone swallows a significant amount of ricin, he or she would develop vomiting and diarrhea that may become bloody. Severe dehydration may be the result, followed by low blood pressure. Other signs or symptoms may include hallucinations, seizures, and blood in the urine. Within several days, the person's liver, spleen, and kidneys might stop working, and the person could die.*
- *Skin and eye exposure: Ricin is unlikely to be absorbed through normal skin. Contact with ricin powders or*

products may cause redness and pain of the skin and the eyes.

And how would a real terrorist go about using ricin as a WMD? Well, al Qaeda knows:

Intelligence officials say they have collected evidence that Qaeda operatives are trying to move castor beans and processing agents to a hideaway in Shabwa Province, in one of Yemen's rugged tribal areas controlled by insurgents. The officials say the evidence points to efforts to secretly concoct batches of the poison, pack them around small explosives, and then try to explode them in contained spaces, like a shopping mall, an airport or a subway station.

To carry out a significant attack with ricin, it would be necessary to suspend the ricin in air (hence the explosives) in an enclosed area where people are likely to inhale the powder.

Dispersing it instead along an interstate highway where people are driving up to 80 mph is almost the opposite of the scenario planned by al Qaeda, and yet the FBI devotes significant space to the freeway part of the plan in the affidavit.

Following the pattern seen in recent FBI busts of "terrorists", this group also was infiltrated by a "confidential human source", referred to as CHS1 in the affidavit. Remarkably, even the first meeting discussed in this affidavit was recorded. A bit of nomenclature stood out to me in the discussion of the recording; the affidavit described the meeting as "consensually recorded". After a bit of digging, I found an IRS description of terms where I learned that this means that the meeting was recorded with the "consent of at least one, but not all, of the participants". This means, of course, that

CHS1 "consented" to the recording, but the other participants in the meeting almost certainly did not.

As usual, CHS1 is an informant facing other charges from the government. From the affidavit:

CHS1 is currently on bond for pending felony state charges. The FBI administered a polygraph test to CHS1 during the investigation of a militia group. The FBI polygrapher determined that CHS1 gave less than truthful responses concerning the activities of the militia group.

It's good that these clowns are off the streets, as it does sound like they had intentions of doing as much harm as they could. However, from what I can see so far in the one affidavit I have read, they hadn't gotten much farther than showing off a few castor beans after a meeting at the local Waffle House. Oh, and the FBI breathlessly tells us that a castor bean obtained from the plotters "tested positive for ricin". Sheesh, I would hope so, since castor beans are the source of ricin. And yes, they even carried out a DNA test to prove the bean was a castor bean.

It will be very informative to read the rest of the documents in this case as they become available in order to determine the extent to which these guys intended violence on their own or if they were pushed in that direction by infiltration.