

2001 anthrax attacks: Vital unresolved anthrax questions and ABC News

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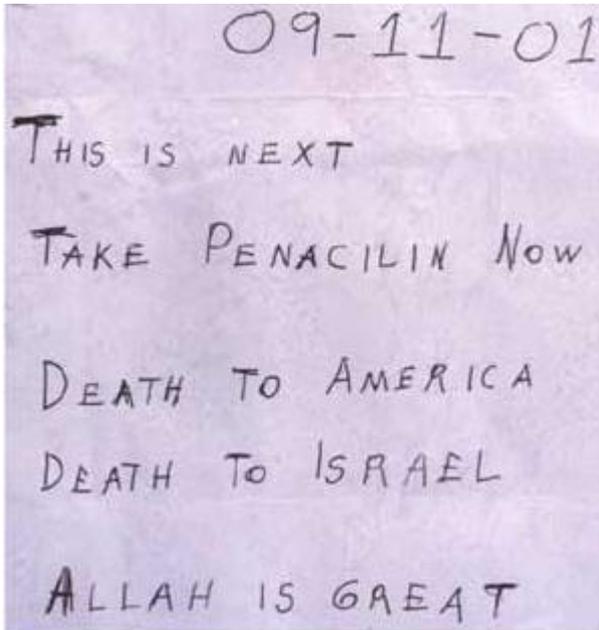
Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Terrorism](#)

A top U.S. government scientist, suspected of the anthrax attacks, commits suicide. ABC News knows who is responsible for false reports blaming those attacks on Iraq, but refuses to say.

The FBI's lead suspect in the September, 2001 anthrax attacks — Bruce E. Ivins — [died Tuesday night](#), apparently by suicide, just as the Justice Department was about to charge him with responsibility for the attacks. For the last 18 years, Ivins was a top anthrax researcher at the U.S. Government's biological weapons research laboratories at Ft. Detrick, Maryland, where he was one of the most elite government anthrax scientists on the research team at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Disease (USAMRIID).

The 2001 anthrax attacks remain one of the great mysteries of the post-9/11 era. After 9/11 itself, the anthrax attacks were probably the most consequential event of the Bush presidency. One could make a persuasive case that they were actually more consequential. The 9/11 attacks were obviously traumatic for the country, but in the absence of the anthrax attacks, 9/11 could easily have been perceived as a single, isolated event. It was really the anthrax letters — with the first one sent on September 18, just one week after 9/11 — that severely ratcheted up the fear levels and created the climate that would dominate in this country for the next several years after. It was anthrax — sent directly into the heart of the country's elite political and media institutions, to then-Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (D-SD), Sen. Pat Leahy (D-Vt), NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw, and other leading media outlets — that created the impression that social order itself was genuinely threatened by Islamic radicalism.

If the now-deceased Ivins really was the culprit behind the attacks, then that means that the anthrax came from a U.S. Government lab, sent by a top U.S. Army scientist at Ft. Detrick. Without resort to any speculation or inferences at all, it is hard to overstate the significance of that fact. From the beginning, there was a clear intent on the part of the anthrax attacker to create a link between the anthrax attacks and both Islamic radicals and the 9/11 attacks. This was the letter sent to Brokaw:



The letter sent to Leahy contained [this message](#):

We have anthrax.

You die now.

Are you afraid?

Death to America.

Death to Israel.

Allah is great.

By design, those attacks put the American population into a state of intense fear of Islamic terrorism, far more than the 9/11 attacks alone could have accomplished.

Much more important than the general attempt to link the anthrax to Islamic terrorists, there was a specific intent — indispensably aided by ABC News — to link the anthrax attacks to Iraq and Saddam Hussein. In my view, and I've written about this [several times](#) and [in great detail](#) to no avail, the role played by ABC News in this episode is the single greatest, unresolved media scandal of this decade. News of Ivins' suicide, which means (presumably) that the anthrax attacks originated from Ft. Detrick, adds critical new facts and heightens how scandalous ABC News' conduct **continues to be** in this matter.

During the last week of October, 2001, ABC News, led by Brian Ross, [continuously trumpeted the claim](#) as their top news story that government tests conducted on the anthrax — **tests conducted at Ft. Detrick** — revealed that the anthrax sent to Daschele contained the chemical additive known as bentonite. ABC News, including Peter Jennings, repeatedly claimed that the presence of bentonite in the anthrax was **compelling evidence that Iraq was responsible for the attacks**, since — as ABC variously claimed — bentonite “is a trademark of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's biological weapons program” and “only one country, Iraq, has used bentonite to produce biological weapons.”

ABC News' claim — which they said came at first from “three well-placed but separate

sources,” followed by “four well-placed and separate sources” — was completely false from the beginning. There never was any bentonite detected in the anthrax (a fact ABC News [acknowledged for the first time in 2007](#) only as a result of my badgering them about this issue). It’s critical to note that it isn’t the case that preliminary tests really did detect bentonite and then subsequent tests found there was none. **No tests ever found or even suggested the presence of bentonite.** The claim was just concocted from the start. It just never happened.

That means that ABC News’ “four well-placed and separate sources” fed them information that was **completely false** — false information that created a very significant link in the public mind between the anthrax attacks and Saddam Hussein. And look where — according to Brian Ross’ report on October 28, 2001 — these tests were conducted:

And despite continued White House denials, four well-placed and separate sources have told ABC News that **initial tests on the anthrax by the US Army at Fort Detrick, Maryland**, have detected trace amounts of the chemical additives bentonite and silica.

Two days earlier, Ross went on ABC News’ *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* and, as the lead story, breathlessly reported:

The discovery of bentonite came in an urgent series of tests conducted at Fort Detrick, Maryland, and elsewhere.

Clearly, Ross’ allegedly four separate sources had to have some specific knowledge of the tests conducted and, if they were really “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’s extremely possible — one could say highly likely — that the same people responsible for perpetrating the attacks were the ones who fed the false reports to the public, through ABC News, that Saddam was behind them. What we know for certain — as a result of the letters accompanying the anthrax — is that whoever perpetrated the attacks **wanted the public to believe they were sent by foreign Muslims.** Feeding claims to ABC News designed to link Saddam to those attacks would, for obvious reasons, promote the goal of the anthrax attacker(s).

Seven years later, it’s difficult for many people to recall, but, as I’ve amply documented, those ABC News reports linking Saddam and anthrax penetrated very deeply — by design — into our public discourse and into the public consciousness. Those reports were absolutely vital in creating the impression during that very volatile time that Islamic terrorists generally, and Iraq and Saddam Hussein specifically, were grave, existential threats to this country. As but one example: after Ross’ lead report on the October 26, 2001 edition of *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* claiming that the Government had found bentonite, this is what Jennings said into the camera:

This news about bentonite as the additive being a trademark of the

Iraqi biological weapons program is very significant. Partly because there's been a lot of pressure on the Bush administration inside and out to go after Saddam Hussein. And some are going to be quick to pick up on this as a smoking gun.

That's exactly what happened. *The Weekly Standard* published two lengthy articles attacking the FBI for focusing on a domestic culprit and — relying almost exclusively on the ABC/Ross report — insisted that Saddam was one of the most likely sources for those attacks. In November, 2001, they published an article (via Lexis) which began:

On the critical issue of who sent the anthrax, it's time to give credit to the ABC website, ABCNews.com, for reporting rings around most other news organizations. Here's a bit from a comprehensive story filed late last week by Gary Matsumoto, **lending further credence to the commonsensical theory (resisted by the White House) that al Qaeda or Iraq — and not some domestic Ted Kaczynski type — is behind the germ warfare.**

The Weekly Standard published a much lengthier and more dogmatic article in April, 2002 again pushing the ABC "bentonite" claims and arguing: "There is purely circumstantial though **highly suggestive evidence that might seem to link Iraq with last fall's anthrax terrorism.**" The American Enterprise Institute's Laurie Mylroie (who had an [AEI article](#) linking Saddam to 9/11 ready for publication at the AEI on **September 13**) [expressly claimed in November, 2001](#) that "there is also **tremendous evidence that subsequent anthrax attacks are connected to Iraq**" and [based that accusation](#) almost exclusively on the report from ABC and Ross ("Mylroie: Evidence Shows Saddam Is Behind Anthrax Attacks").

And then, when President Bush named Iraq as a member of the "Axis of Evil" in his [January, 2002 State of the Union speech](#) — just two months after ABC's report, when the anthrax attacks were still very vividly on the minds of Americans — he specifically touted this claim:

The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade.

Bush's invocation of Iraq was the only reference in the State of the Union address to the unsolved anthrax attacks. And the Iraq-anthrax connection was explicitly made by the President at a time when, as we now know, [he was already eagerly planning an attack on Iraq](#).

There can't be any question that this extremely flamboyant though totally false linkage between Iraq and the anthrax attacks — accomplished primarily by the false bentonite reports from ABC News and Brian Ross — played a very significant role in how Americans perceived of the Islamic threat generally and Iraq specifically. As but one very illustrative example, *The Washington Post's* columnist, Richard Cohen, supported the invasion of Iraq, came to regret that support, and then explained what led him to do so, in a [2004 Post column](#) entitled "Our Forgotten Panic":

I'm not sure if panic is quite the right word, but it is close enough. **Anthrax played a role in my decision to support the Bush administration's**

desire to take out Saddam Hussein. I linked him to anthrax, which I linked to Sept. 11. I was not going to stand by and simply wait for another attack — more attacks. I was going to go to the source, Hussein, and get him before he could get us. As time went on, I became more and more questioning, but I had a hard time backing down from my initial whoop and holler for war.

Cohen — in a March 18, 2008 [Slate article](#) in which he explains why he wrongfully supported the attack on Iraq — disclosed this:

Anthrax. Remember anthrax? It seems no one does anymore — at least it's never mentioned. But right after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, letters laced with anthrax were received at the New York Post and Tom Brokaw's office at NBC. . . . There was ample reason to be afraid.

The attacks were not entirely unexpected. **I had been told soon after Sept. 11 to secure Cipro, the antidote to anthrax. The tip had come in a roundabout way from a high government official,** and I immediately acted on it. I was carrying Cipro way before most people had ever heard of it.

For this and other reasons, the anthrax letters appeared linked to the awful events of Sept. 11. It all seemed one and the same. Already, my impulse had been to strike back, an overwhelming urge that had, in fact, taken me by surprise on Sept. 11 itself when the first of the Twin Towers had collapsed. . . .

In the following days, as the horror started to be airbrushed — no more bodies plummeting to the sidewalk — the anthrax letters started to come, some to people I knew. And I thought, No, I'm not going to sit here passively and wait for it to happen. I wanted to go to "them," whoever "they" were, grab them by the neck, and get them before they could get us. **One of "them" was Saddam Hussein.** He had messed around with anthrax . . . He was a nasty little fascist, and he needed to be dealt with.

That, more or less, is how I made my decision to support the war in Iraq.

Cohen's mental process that led him to link anthrax to Iraq and then to support an attack on Iraq, warped as it is, was extremely common. Having heard ABC News in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attack flamboyantly and repeatedly link Saddam to the anthrax attacks, followed by George Bush's making the same linkage (albeit more subtly) in his January, 2002 State of the Union speech, much of the public had implanted into their minds that Saddam Hussein was not just evil, but a severe threat to the U.S., likely the primary culprit behind the anthrax attacks. All along, though, the anthrax came from a U.S. Government/Army research lab.

Critically, ABC News never retracted its story (they merely noted, as they had done from the start, that the White House denied the reports). And thus, the linkage between Saddam and the anthrax attacks — **every bit as false as the linkage between Saddam and the 9/11 attacks** — persisted.

We now know — we knew even before news of Ivins' suicide last night, and know especially in light of it — that the anthrax attacks didn't come from Iraq or any foreign government at all. It came from our own Government's scientist, from the top Army bioweapons research laboratory. More significantly, the false reports linking anthrax to Iraq also came from the U.S. Government — from people with some type of significant links to the same facility responsible for the attacks themselves.

Surely the question of who generated those false Iraq-anthrax reports is one of the most significant and explosive stories of the last decade. The motive to fabricate reports of bentonite and a link to Saddam is glaring. Those fabrications played some significant role — I'd argue a very major role — in propagandizing the American public to perceive of Saddam as a threat, and further, propagandized the public to believe that our country was sufficiently threatened by foreign elements that a whole series of radical policies that the neoconservatives both within and outside of the Bush administration wanted to pursue — including an attack on Iraq and a whole array of assaults on our basic constitutional framework — were justified and even necessary in order to survive.

ABC News already knows the answers to these questions. They know who concocted the false bentonite story and who passed it on to them with the specific intent of having them broadcast those false claims to the world, in order to link Saddam to the anthrax attacks and — as importantly — to conceal the real culprit(s) (apparently within the U.S. government) who were behind the attacks. And yet, unbelievably, they are keeping the story to themselves, refusing to disclose who did all of this. They're allegedly a news organization, in possession of one of the most significant news stories of the last decade, and they are concealing it from the public, even years later.

They're not protecting "sources." The people who fed them the bentonite story aren't "sources." They're fabricators and liars who purposely used ABC News to disseminate to the American public an extremely consequential and damaging falsehood. But by protecting the wrongdoers, ABC News has made itself complicit in this fraud perpetrated on the public, rather than a news organization uncovering such frauds. That is why this is one of the most extreme journalistic scandals that exists, and it deserves a lot more debate and attention than it has received thus far.

UPDATE: One other fact to note here is how bizarrely inept the effort by the Bush DOJ to find the real attacker has been. Extremely suspicious behavior from Ivins — including his having found and completely cleaned anthrax traces on a co-worker's desk at the Ft. Detrick lab without telling anyone that he did so and then offering extremely strange explanations for why — was [publicly reported](#) as early as 2004 by *The LA Times* (Ivins "detected an apparent anthrax leak in December 2001, at the height of the anthrax mailings investigation, but did not report it. Ivins considered the problem solved when he cleaned the affected office with bleach").

In October 2004, *USA Today* [reported](#) that Ivins was involved in another similar incident, in April of 2002, when Ivins performed unauthorized tests to detect the origins of more anthrax residue found at Ft. Detrick. Yet rather than having that repeated, strange behavior lead the FBI to discover that he was involved in the attacks, there was a very public effort — as Atrios notes [here](#) — to blame the attacks on Iraq and then, ultimately, to [blame Stephen Hatfill](#). Amazingly, as Atrios notes [here](#), very few people other than "a few crazy bloggers are even interested" in finding out what happened here and why — at least to demand that ABC News report the vital information that it already has that will shed very significant light on much of this.

UPDATE II: Ivins' local paper, *Frederick News* in Maryland, has [printed several Letters to the Editor](#) written by Ivins over the years. Though the underlying ideology is a bit difficult to discern, he seems clearly driven by a belief in the need for Christian doctrine to govern our laws and political institutions, with a particular interest in Catholic dogma. He wrote things like this:

Today we frequently admonish people who oppose abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide or capital punishment to keep their religious, moral, and philosophical beliefs to themselves.

Before dispensing such admonishments in the future, perhaps we should gratefully consider some of our country's most courageous, historical figures who refused to do so.

And then there's this rather cryptic message, published in 2006:

Rabbi Morris Kosman is entirely correct in summarily rejecting the demands of the Frederick Imam for a "dialogue."

By blood and faith, Jews are God's chosen, and have no need for "dialogue" with any gentile. End of "dialogue."

It should be noted that the lawyer who had been representing Ivins in connection with the anthrax investigation [categorically maintains Ivins' innocence](#) and attributes his suicide to "the relentless pressure of accusation and innuendo."

On a note related to the main topic of the post, [macgupta in comments](#) notes the numerous prominent people in addition to those mentioned here — including *The Wall St. Journal* Editors and former CIA Director James Woosely — who insisted rather emphatically from the beginning of the anthrax attacks that Saddam was likely to blame. Indeed, [the WSJ Editorial Page](#) — along with others on the Right such as [Michael Barone of U.S. News & World Report and Fox News](#) — continued even into 2007 to insist that the FBI was erring by focusing on domestic suspects rather than Middle Easterners.

The Nation's Michael Massing [noted at the time](#) (in November, 2001) that as a direct result of the anthrax attacks, and the numerous claims insinuating that Iraq was behind them, "the political and journalistic establishment suddenly seems united in wanting to attack Iraq." There has long been an intense desire on the neoconservative Right to falsely link anthrax to Saddam specifically and Muslims generally. ABC News was, and (as a result of its inexcusable silence) continues to be, their best friend.

UPDATE III: See [this important point from Atrios](#) about Richard Cohen's admission that he was told before the anthrax attacks happened by a "high government official" to take cipro. Atrios writes: "now that we know that the US gov't believes that anthrax came from the inside, shouldn't Cohen be a wee bit curious about what this warning was based on?"

That applies to much of the Beltway class, including many well-connected journalists, who were quietly popping cipro back then because, like Cohen, they heard from Government sources that they should. Leave aside the ethical questions about the fact that these journalists kept those warnings to themselves. Wouldn't the most basic journalistic instincts lead them now — in light of the claims by our Government that the attacks came from a Government scientist — to wonder why and how their Government sources were warning about an anthrax attack? Then again, the most basic journalistic instincts would have lead ABC News to reveal who concocted and fed them the false "Saddam/anthrax" reports in the first place, and yet we still are forced to guess at those questions because ABC News continues to cover up the identity of the perpetrators.

UPDATE IV: John McCain, on the David Letterman Show, [October 18, 2001](#) (days before ABC News first broadcast their bentonite report):

LETTERMAN: How are things going in Afghanistan now?

MCCAIN: I think we're doing fine . . . I think we'll do fine. The second phase — if I could just make one, very quickly — **the second phase is Iraq. There is some indication, and I don't have the conclusions, but some of this anthrax may — and I emphasize may — have come from Iraq.**

LETTERMAN: Oh is that right?

MCCAIN: If that should be the case, that's when some tough decisions are gonna have to be made.

ThinkProgress has the [video](#). Someone ought to ask McCain what “indication” he was referencing that the anthrax “may have come from Iraq.”

After all, three days later, McCain and Joe Lieberman went [on Meet the Press](#) (on October 21, 2001) and both strongly suggested that we would have to attack Iraq. Lieberman said that the anthrax was so complex and potent that “there's either a significant amount of money behind this, or this is state-sponsored, or this is stuff that was stolen from the former Soviet program.”

As I said, it is not possible to overstate the importance of anthrax in putting the country into the state of fear that led to the attack on Iraq and so many of the other abuses of the Bush era. There are few news stories more significant, if there are any, than unveiling who the culprits were behind this deliberate propaganda. The fact that the current GOP presidential nominee claimed back then on national television to have some “indication” linking Saddam to the anthrax attacks makes it a bigger story still.

UPDATE V: I tried to be careful here to avoid accepting as True the matter of Ivins' guilt. Very early on in the article, I framed the analysis this way: “**If the now-deceased Ivins really was the culprit behind the attacks**, then that means that the anthrax came from a U.S. Government lab,” and I then noted in Update II that Ivins' lawyer vehemently maintains his innocence. My whole point here is that **the U.S. Government now claims the anthrax attacks came from a Government scientist at a U.S. Army lab**, and my conclusions follow from that premise, accepted as true only for purposes of this analysis.

It's worth underscoring that it is far from clear that Ivins had anything to do with the anthrax attacks, and [someone in comments claiming \(anonymously though credibly\)](#) that he knew Ivins personally asserts that Ivins was innocent and makes the case as to why the Government's accusations are suspect. As I see it, the more doubt there is about who was responsible for the anthrax attacks, the **greater** is the need for ABC News to reveal who fabricated their reports linking the attacks to Iraq.

UPDATE VI: I'll be on Rachel Maddow's radio show tonight at 8:30 p.m. EST to discuss this story. Local listings and live audio feed are [here](#).

Numerous people have advised me in comments and via email that ABC News is deleting any mention of my piece today in the [comment section to their article on the Ivins suicide](#) (though many such comments now seem to be posted there). Last year, ABC was in [full](#)

[denial mode](#) when responding to the stories I wrote about this issue. The key here, I think, will be to try to devise the right strategy to induce the right Congressional Committee to hold hearings on the false ABC News stories and the anthrax issue generally. I hope to have more details on that effort shortly.

— Glenn Greenwald



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