

NEW ANTHRAX SCARE: THIS TIME LEAHY'S LETTER TESTS NEGATIVE

With the war drums on Iran beating loudly, homeland security theater is ratcheting up yet another level as a wave of letters containing a powdery substance have been mailed again to media and political figures. This time, unlike the October-November 2001 episode, all letters tested so far have been negative for anthrax or other harmful substances, but the mailer has threatened that ten percent of the large number of letters mailed will be deadly. Most notable in this current series is that a letter was received at the Burlington, Vermont office of Senator Patrick Leahy. Recall that Senator Leahy was one of those targeted with the most deadly version of the anthrax mailed in 2001.

Details on this latest episode were first reported by Reuters on Wednesday:

Several members of the Congress received mail threatening a biological attack and containing a suspicious powder later found to be harmless as law enforcement officials warned on Wednesday that more letters could be on their way.

A number of media organizations and TV shows, including the New York Times and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, received mail postmarked Oregon warning that letters had been sent to the Washington or local offices of all 100 U.S. senators and that 10 contained a deadly pathogen, a law enforcement source said.

House of Representatives Speaker John Boehner, the top Republican in Congress, received a letter containing a powdery substance at one of his offices in his home state of Ohio, a Republican aide said, adding that the powder was

harmless.

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In a notice to Senate staffers titled “Urgent: Suspicious Mail Alert,” [Senate Sergeant at Arms Terrance] Gainer warned that the sender of the letters had “indicated that additional letters containing a powdery substance will be arriving at more Senate offices and that some of these letters may contain actual harmful material.”

More details have since come out:

The letters make vague complaints about too much money in politics and had a Portland, Oregon return address from an organization listed as “The MIB, LLC,” a law enforcement official told CBS News.

In addition to the letters to the lawmakers, officials said television comedians Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert received letters mentioning the letters to senators.

The author told the comedians he would send letters to all 100 senators and ten percent of them would contain “lethal pathogens,” an official told CBS News.

The author wanted an end to corporate money and lobbying, an end to “corporate personhood,” and called for a new constitutional convention to rewrite the constitution.

The author also told the comedians he would tell the senators they are “working for the wrong side” and there is a ten percent chance they have been exposed to a lethal pathogen. The author also said he “randomized” which letters would contain the pathogen and even he did not know who would get which letter.

Because of the advance notice, the letter received at Leahy's office was spotted and the authorities were called:

The senator's staff noticed one address on an incoming letter and contacted the authorities just after noon.

The entire building at the corner of Main Street and South Winooski Avenue was evacuated. Authorities X-rayed the letter, a bomb squad checked it and hazmat teams inspected it.

"The main focus has been the substance that was inside that letter," said Deputy Chief Andi Higbee of the Burlington police.

Hazmat investigators said that the letter tested negative for anthrax, though it did contain a powdery substance.

A functional Congress would use the occasion of this latest flurry of harmless threats to demand that the Department of Justice reopen its failed Amerithrax investigation into the 2001 anthrax attacks. The continued insistence that Bruce Ivins carried out the 2001 attacks entirely on his own diminishes the credibility of the FBI and the Justice Department in general. But don't hold your breath, despite the fact that the real culprit from 2001 has not been found, Congress is showing no inclination to nudge DOJ into action.

Should any of these letters in the latest attack turn out to have anthrax, would the FBI have the courage to compare the DNA in those samples to the DNA from the 2001 attacks?

Postscript: There does appear to be one unrelated active outbreak of anthrax that has killed at least one cow in Mississippi. Although rare, such cases in livestock occur naturally.