

WHY DIDN'T FBI INVESTIGATE AFIP'S ROLE IN STARTING THE IRAQ-ANTHRAX RUMORS?

I've been reading the National Academy of Sciences Anthrax Report and noted something odd in follow-up to the McClatchy report of the other day describing unexplained tin and silicon in one of the anthrax samples. (Here's Jim White's post on the report.) As McClatchy reported, there's some weird data about silicon and tin in some of the samples.

The lab data, contained in more than 9,000 pages of files that emerged a year after the Justice Department closed its inquiry and condemned the late Army microbiologist Bruce Ivins as the perpetrator, shows unusual levels of silicon and tin in anthrax powder from two of the five letters.

[snip]

To arrive at that position, however, the FBI had to discount its own bulk testing results showing that silicon composed an extraordinary 10.8 percent of a sample from a mailing to the New York Post and as much as 1.8 percent of the anthrax from a letter sent to Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, far more than the occasional trace contamination. Tin – not usually seen in anthrax powder at all – was measured at 0.65 percent and 0.2 percent, respectively, in those letters.

But it turns out that the weirdest data—showing the 10.8 silicon in the NY Post sample—didn't come from FBI. As NAS explained, that data came

from the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology.

Early in the investigation, AFIP performed [scanning electron microscopy-energy-dispersive X-ray] SEM-EDX analysis of a New York Post letter sample and found regions in the sample having high silicon content but no oxygen, suggesting the presence of silicon-rich material that was not related to nanoparticulate silica. While this observation could have led to an explanation for the difference between the bulk and individual spore measurements, follow-up experiments apparently were not performed.

A release from AFIP describing their analysis of the Daschle letter (not the NY Post letter) is one of the most cited sources of the claim that the anthrax was weaponized in a uniquely Iraqi fashion.

“Ft Detrick sought our assistance to determine the specific components of the anthrax found in the Daschle letter,” said Florabel G. Mullick, MD, ScD, SES, AFIP Principal Deputy Director and department chair. AFIP experts utilized an energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer (an instrument used to detect the presence of otherwise-unseen chemicals through characteristic wavelengths of X-ray light) to confirm the previously unidentifiable substance as silica. “This was a key component,” Mullick said. “Silica prevents the anthrax from aggregating, making it easier to aerosolize. Significantly, we noted the absence of aluminum with the silica. This combination had previously been found in anthrax produced by Iraq.”

This was the analysis that a USAMRID scientist used to declare that the anthrax was weaponized—which said scientist retracted after

later Sandia analysis was done (from the NAS report).

An initial finding by the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) found, upon gross examination, that the spores exhibited a silicon signal and sometimes exhibited an oxygen signal. Subsequent studies conducted by Sandia National Laboratories (as described in Chapter 4 of this report) determined that the silicon was localized to the spore coat within the exosporium—that is, it was incorporated into the cell as a natural part of the cell formation process. The USAMRIID scientist who first reviewed the AFIP results and made statements regarding the presence of silicon and possible weaponization retracted those earlier statements.

So some of this was known before—that AFIP served a key role in early rumors that the anthrax was weaponized in a way that pointed to Iraq. But the NAS report seems to confirm that the Iraq rumors originated at least in part from AFIP.

That's all very interesting for several reasons. First, because FBI claims to have gotten data on AFIP's SEM-EDX tests just last year.

The committee notes that this information was not made available to it or to the FBI until spring 2010.

That would mean FBI didn't get (or ask for?) the information until after it had closed the investigation (they closed the investigation in February 2010)!

It would also suggest—rather incredibly—that FBI didn't hunt down this information when they were stonewalling Jerry Nadler about it (as McClatchy reminds).

New York Democratic Rep. Jerrold Nadler

asked FBI Director Robert Mueller how much silicon was in the Post and Leahy letters at a hearing before the House Judiciary Committee in September 2008. The Justice Department responded seven months later that silicon made up 1.4 percent of the Leahy powder (without disclosing the 1.8 percent reading) and that “a reliable quantitative measurement was not possible” for the Post letter.

More interesting still, NAS can't explain what relationship existed between FBI and AFIP.

The committee also reviewed reports of work carried out in parallel at the AFIP although it is not clear how closely AFIP and the FBI investigative and scientific teams worked together or coordinated their efforts.

I'm also confused about when AFIP did these tests. In its list of official tests, NAS describes the AFIP SEM-EDX tests as having taken place in November 2001.

But somewhere along the way, perhaps along with information about the investigation of a claimed al Qaeda anthrax site explored in 2004, NAS got additional materials from AFIP dating to October 2001.

AFIP Materials related to USAMRIID
Specimens October 2001 (41 pages)

And still more interesting is the reference to documents provided to NAS in December 2010—at the time when FBI was trying to stall the release of this document—showing AFIP, along with USAMRID, purportedly conducted anthrax studies on the remains of the Flight 93 9/11 hijackers.

Finally, in the new materials provided to the committee it is noted that

[polymerase chain reaction] PCR analysis was performed on human remains from United flight 93 on 9/11/2001 that were identified as those of the hijackers (B3D1). Analysis was performed at USAMRIID and at AFIP for sequences diagnostic of B. anthracis. **One assay at USAMRIID gave positive results, but these results were believed by the FBI to be due to laboratory contamination.** All other results were negative. As the committee learned at the January 2011 meeting, there were no tests done on remains from any of the other September 11, 2001 hijackers. [my emphasis]

So let's see. At some point during the anthrax attacks in 2001, USAMRID and AFIP decided to do anthrax tests on material from Flight 93. They purportedly found the hijackers tested positive for anthrax! But on second thought, FBI tells us, that positive result came from "lab contamination." And then, presumably just after those tests, USAMRID and AFIP, perhaps working outside the chain of the official FBI investigation of anthrax, discover evidence implicating Iraq in the anthrax attacks. Results that, once again, further testing suggested was inaccurate.

Another example of lab contamination, I guess. Funny how that happens.

And the FBI wants us to believe that over the course of a 9 year investigation, they never decided to investigate the circumstances surrounding this partnership that somehow always resulted in convenient propaganda?