

THE FBI FEEDING FANTASIES FOR FUN AND FEAR

Jim linked to this long Esquire story on the Waffle House plotters, the four senior citizens arrested last year for a plot to attack government workers and make ricin. It traces the plot from the online regrets of the leader of the plot, Fred Thomas, through the gateway drugs of Rush and Hannity and Beck to Mike Vanderboegh's blog to the militia. It describes how the informant in the case, Joe Sims, largely drummed up the plot in an apparent effort to win leniency in the six sex crime charges against him. And it tracks all the details the government or Sims supplied that were necessary for this "plot," including the money to buy the silencer and explosives.

It's a story you could tell about many of the aspirational Islamic terrorists arrested in this country too, though there the gateway drug would go through Awlaki's writings, mosques might play the role that the Waffle House did, and where mental illness often disables the culprit as much as these men's age and infirmity.

That said, perhaps telling this story about old white men rather than young Islamic men makes it easier for author Tom Junod to capture the dynamic of many of the counterterror plots the FBI puts together.

He had never committed a crime. Now he was in jail for a crime he might not have been able to commit – for dreaming it, thinking it, planning it, and taking what the government calls "concrete steps" to carry it out. Of course, he never did carry it out, thank God, because of the government's policy of preemption – because the FBI found out that he was in the grip of a murderous fantasy and stopped him before he could

make it real. But Fred Thomas was also in the grip of something else besides fantasy, and what he was also in the grip of was the government that used its resources to *make* his fantasy real so that it could stop him from carrying it out. He was in the grip of a confidential informant who, over an eight-month period, kept calling him and coming to his home, and sat at the very table where I sat with Charlotte Thomas and drank coffee from a Christmas cup. And the confidential informant worked for the government – no, he worked for *us*, though we're not supposed to know who he is or the nature of his résumé.

[snip]

The moral order was reversed: The old man who had committed no crime fell under the sway of a much younger man who was already charged with the kind of crimes synonymous with a betrayal of trust, indeed with evil itself. Through the government policy of preempting terror, of making terror happen in order to stop it from happening, the alleged author of a crime from which people instinctively recoil – incest – gained moral advantage over the alleged author of a crime that did not yet exist. What's more, the younger man was given every possible resource to work toward the fruition of the hypothetical crimes of the older man in order to keep his own ass out of jail. It's a kind of madness, and yet Charlotte Thomas didn't see that Fred Thomas was going along with it. Oh, she saw Joe Sims enough to know that she didn't like him. But she could never see that in some ways Joe Sims knew her husband of fifty-one years better than she did.

In this case, we may actually trade hard time for (alleged) sex crimes for convictions of

these four wingnuts who had their fantasies fleshed out by the FBI. (Though, after reading this, I'm more convinced the two men primarily implicated in the ricin plot, Ray Adams and Samuel Crump, will beat their charges, since the most incriminating comments were not taped and therefore rely on the credibility of Sims.)

Which brings me back to the comments US Attorney Sally Quillian Yates made when announcing these arrests.

While many are focused on the threat posed by international violent extremists, this case demonstrates that we must also remain vigilant in protecting our country from citizens within our own borders who threaten our safety and security.

This is what counts as vigilance: recruiting a guy charged with molesting his step-daughters to incite an aspirational plot among senior citizens.