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ROPE-A-DOPE

Now that five “Liberty City” plotters stand convicted, should we feel safer?

By Julius Wachtel, (c) 2010

“This wasn't so much a case of the FBI interrupting an ongoing terror plot, but of the agency providing a blueprint for it.” So said the editorial board of the [Miami Herald](#).

“We identified and disrupted a terrorist threat, and as a result our community and nation are a much safer place.” So said [Jonathan Solomon](#), special agent in charge of the FBI office in Miami.

Which account is the more accurate? Two weeks after five Liberty City (Miami) residents were convicted of plotting to bomb the Miami FBI office and the Chicago Sears Tower, the truth remains elusive. With trials in November 2007 and April 2008 ending in hung juries (one defendant was acquitted at the end of the first trial, another at the most recent) things seem a lot less certain than three years ago, when [Attorney General Alberto Gonzales](#) announced the dismantling of a home-grown terrorist cell that intended to wage a “full ground war against the United States.”

It all began when a snitch told the FBI that the head of a tiny Muslim sect in the impoverished “Liberty City” area of Miami was ranting against the Government. During the next few months the original stoolie and a second informer posing as an Al Qaeda representative encouraged Narseal Batiste and his followers to talk trash about the U.S.

As the [indictment](#) attests, Batiste, who once lived in Chicago, was recorded saying that he wanted to blow up the city's famed landmark, the 108-floor Sears Tower. In another taped event an informer led Batiste and his motley crew (the indictment referred to them as “soldiers”) in pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda, a ritual that was offered to jurors as proof positive of the cabal's dastardly intentions. Prompted for a wish list, Batiste requested radios, guns, boots, weapons, a camera and \$50,000 cash (he got boots and the camera.) He and an underling then drove around Miami in a van rented by the FBI and photographed Federal offices they supposedly intended to bomb.

Batiste would later testify that he only cased the buildings to collect the 50 G's. Whatever his intentions, taking the pictures was the overt act that agents and prosecutors had been waiting for. On June 22, 2006 Batiste and six followers (the

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indictment ominously called them “soldiers”) were arrested for conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization and to destroy buildings with explosives, charges that could bring terms of as much as fifty years.

That’s when a funny thing happened. During a press conference [Assistant FBI Director John Pistole](#) let slip that the plot was “more aspirational than operational.” His candid comment, which probably caused much heartburn at the Hoover building, reflected the undeniable fact that the case against the men was awfully thin. No evidence of any kind -- neither weapons, terrorist plans nor bomb manuals -- was recovered from the forlorn warehouse that served as the alleged terrorist lair. What there was lots and lots of chatter, much of it prompted by informers who were reportedly paid more than \$100,000 to help bring the motley group within reach of the law.

Considering all that it’s no surprise that juries revolted twice. [Jeffrey Agron](#), a lawyer and foreman at the first trial said that jurors felt the first informant lacked credibility, and that the second led the defendants on. “It’s a case where a government informant got a bunch of guys together to swear a loyalty oath to Al Qaeda,” he said. “It’s a B movie really, more than a criminal case.”

Yet like everyone in Hollywood knows, given a large enough ad budget even a lousy movie can succeed. After taking “[three bites of the apple](#)” and spending millions the Feds finally managed to tailor a case that stuck. Or mostly stuck. A third mistrial was avoided when the judge expelled a juror whom the others accused of refusing to deliberate. Whether she was uncooperative or a victim of bullying will surely come up on appeal.

Domestic Jihad, virtually unknown before 9/11, has become a growth industry. Fortunately, our homegrown terrorists seem to lack the leadership skills, ideas and physical and material means to act on their own. With always an informer to track the shenanigans, remarkably not a single plot has slipped through to completion. In the most recent example, which occurred only days ago in the Bronx, [four ex-cons got caught](#) planting what they thought were real bombs at two synagogues. They reportedly got the devices (and one supposes, the notion) from [Shahed Hussain](#), an experienced FBI informer. Until the rumble in the Bronx the smooth-talking ex-con’s claim to fame was the [Albany, New York “pizza shop” sting](#) of 2004, where he got two Muslim men targeted by the FBI to help him in a bizarre, wholly made-up money laundering scheme that defense lawyers fruitlessly challenged as an outrageous example of entrapment.

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It's hard to feel sorry for those who harbor radical fantasies. Still, as the writer well knows, there's a big difference between infiltrating an active criminal organization and trolling for naive opportunists. Many believe that the collapse of the Twin Towers led to a like collapse in the values and precepts that make the American system of justice special. Of course, we *should* worry when the government acts as a provocateur. And it's not only a moral concern. As we've pointed out in earlier posts manipulating dopes and staging show trials promotes an illusion of safety while distracting agencies from doing the hard work that's necessary to uncover real threats.

Where the Feds once led the charge for higher standards, it seems that they're now leading the race to the cellar. It's not the *terrorists'* character that we ought to be worrying about.