

Press Release

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FBI Response to *Rolling Stone* Magazine Article on Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs)

(This is the full version of a letter sent to the editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine in response to their article, *The Fear Factory* which appeared in the February 7, 2008 edition.) *Rolling Stone* printed an edited version to comport with their word limitations, in the February 22, 2008 issue.

There is an old saying among reporters: The worst thing you can do to a good story is check it out. Guy Lawson ("The Fear Factory" *Rolling Stone*, February 7th) brings hypothetical theory to new heights. After "checking it out," Mr. Lawson simply tailored his story around any compelling facts that did not fit his original premise. Before coming to the FBI, over 25 years ago, I won most of the major awards that they give to a reporter. I feel I have standing to say that a journalist has an obligation to tell at least two sides of a story. Your readers only got one.

The premise to which Mr. Lawson's story was married is his theory that the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) have to justify their existence in the post 9/11 world by ginning up thin cases against arguably docile suspects who have neither the intent nor capability to cause real harm. Mr. Lawson deftly skips over 27 years of the work of the JTTFs capturing al Qaeda suspects from the first World Trade Center bombing, preventing the attacks on New York landmarks, the Embassy and USS Cole bombings, the Millennium Plot and more. Instead, Mr. Lawson narrowed his focus to cases involving small groups and "lone wolves" that planned to murder American citizens on U.S. soil.

Derrick Shareef, the convicted terrorist at the center of the story who Mr. Lawson frivolously described as being a "wannabe jihadi," possessed all of the traits necessary to harm or kill innocent citizens. Investigators were also keenly aware of Mr. Shareef's continuous contacts with Hassan Abujihad, another domestic terror suspect being monitored by the FBI. Mr. Abujihad was indicted for sending classified e-mails while serving on a U.S. Navy ship to pro-Taliban forces, divulging his naval battle group's operational vulnerabilities. It was only after the two had a falling out that Mr. Shareef accelerated his plans to act independently and swiftly to launch an attack. The JTTF took correct action to disrupt his plans and arrest him.

Mr. Shareef, like scores of suicide bombers overseas, was infused with a poisonous ideology, displayed a single-minded desire to take action, regularly declared his intent to kill, and sought to obtain weapons to commit an attack.

One needs only to reflect on the example of Timothy McVeigh, who murdered 168 U.S. citizens in the Oklahoma City bombing. Mr. McVeigh could have been described as having little money, working a dead end job as a security guard, dealing with anger issues, and devoted to an extremist ideology. Like Mr. Shareef, Mr. McVeigh discussed his plans with others, cased potential targets, took action to secure explosives for the operation, and tried to do it as cheaply as possible.

Other killers have started out with even less. Take John Allan Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, the "D.C. Snipers." Two practically homeless men, living out of a car, filled with hate and armed with a high-powered assault rifle. As in the case of Mr. Shareef, you might be tempted to call them "losers," but their actions paralyzed greater Washington D.C. for three weeks in 2002. In the end, 10 people died in the attacks and still others were identified from earlier shootings in other states. None of these men would have met Mr. Lawson's standard as being a legitimate threat, yet had the FBI known about them before they struck, we would have been severely criticized.

At any point during his planning process, Mr. Shareef could have stopped his actions, but he chose not to. There is no evidence that he ever wavered in his desire to murder holiday shoppers in the CherryVale Mall that day. Would he have succeeded had it not been for the diligence of the JTTF? Mr. Lawson's story suggests we should be willing to take this gamble, but he is not responsible for the outcome. No one will knock on the doors of *Rolling Stone* and ask why people died that day.

Not every terrorist needs to be linked to an organized group like al Qaeda to kill the innocent. What these lessons have taught us is that if the motivation is strong enough, challenges such as getting weapons or paying for the operation can be overcome.

JTTF agents and officers abide by FBI procedures, Department of Justice legal guidance, and the United States Constitution. They must bring facts before a judge to get authorization for a warrant or electronic surveillance. Since 9/11, the JTTFs have broken a dozen plots targeting civilians on U.S. soil. None of them have been well-financed, but I cannot remember any victim of a terrorist attack lamenting that they wished they'd been killed by a more expensive plot.

Mr. Lawson's sweeping statement, "The defendants posed little if any demonstrable threat to anyone or anything," seems to be his uneducated guess rather than an objective summary of the legal outcomes or courtroom results. In almost every case heard by a jury, the defendants were found guilty, in spite of having some dedicated and talented defense lawyers articulate the same claims Mr. Lawson has swallowed. The Yassin Aref case in Albany, New York, and the Hamid Hayat case in Lodi, California, are two examples. In other cases such as the "Lackawanna Six," and the Torrance cell, the defendants pled guilty with the advice of counsel.

If we have identified somebody with the intent to take lives in the name of extremism and we fail to take the appropriate action, we are ignoring our sworn mission to protect the innocent. Regardless of criticism, it is our obligation to err on the side of safety while continuing to adhere to Constitutional protections.

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