

7 Deadly Myths About Weapons of Terror

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Among JFK's best known maxims is that the great enemy of the truth is not the deliberate lie, but the myth. In the age of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and flu pandemics, there is no shortage of half-truths floating around. But we can't blame people for being confused.

For an overwhelming majority — based on a recent Google search — the biggest myth that comes to mind in the world of weapons of terror is Iraq's infamous WMDs that were never found. There are other myths, perhaps not nearly as riveting, that pervade in the nation's collective consciousness and should be dispelled.

Following is what we regard as seven noteworthy misconceptions associated with weapons of terror.

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Myth #7: Nerve Gasses Are Terrorists' Chemical Weapons of Choice



To say that nerve gasses such as sarin, taban, or VX are not threats would be a stretch.

After all, the first acts of "ultra-terrorism" — defined as the use of a weapon of mass destruction in a terrorist attack — employed sarin. The Aum Shinrikyo cult first dispersed the Nazi-era nerve gas on the town of Matsumoto, Japan, in June 1994. Less than a year later, it released the same substance in five Tokyo subway cars during rush hour.

But a study of how the doomsday cult acquired and manufactured sarin, and other chemical and biological weapons, suggests that a similar organization would have a hard time producing such complex weapons in today's security environment.

Meanwhile, shipments of deadly chlorine gas, a substance which also has been used in terrorist attacks, continues to roll through U.S. rail yards on their way to water treatment plants, with little protection.

Because Japan had laws restricting how far the police could go in investigating religious organizations, Aum Shinrikyo was able to amass millions of dollars to pursue its goals to create an Apocalypse. It used money bilked from followers and legitimate businesses to build complex chemical weapon plants in remote areas and amassed stockpiles of chemicals, as detailed in David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall's book on the case, "The Cult at the End of the World."

Aum purposefully recruited alienated chemistry and engineering students from top universities and set them to work creating weapons of mass destruction. They produced a variety of nerve gasses, biological agents such as anthrax and botulism and were even considering the purchase of a nuclear bomb from the former Soviet Union.

Despite the organization's technical prowess, it was never able to master the art of dispersing chemical and biological agents. It was reduced to poking holes in plastic bags with sharpened umbrella tips in the subway attack.

Could such efforts be duplicated today? It's hard to see such a large operation flying under the radar of police and intelligence agencies in the post-9/11 world and particularly in modern nations such as Japan and the United States. Islamic terrorists in ungoverned territories, given the ability to find technical experts and the funding, could duplicate Aum Shinrikyo's "success," but would still have to smuggle the volatile substances in large containers to their intended target.

As many counterterrorism experts have pointed out, the 9/11 masterminds did not have to smuggle any weapons into the United States to carry out their plot. They used what was on hand.

Other experts have warned for years of the threat of toxic industrial chemicals such as chlorine gas. Federal regulations require railroads to transport the substance. Oftentimes, they pass by major cities. The transport of this deadly gas increases their insurance premiums, but laws prohibit them from refusing such cargo.

Rail yards and facilities that use the chemical such as wastewater treatment plants are protected, but there is no way to make the thousands of miles of railroad tracks a so-called "hard target."

And there is precedence for using chlorine as a terrorist weapon. In early 2007, suicide bombers in Iraq blew up trucks carrying the gas in public areas and caused hundreds of casualties.