

Weaponized Letter and Package Attacks Against Public and Private Sector Targets: Key Takeaways for Security Practitioners

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Abstract:

This article assesses the risk posed by the ability of a variety of threat actors to send weaponized letters and packages, usually via a country's mail system, against a spectrum of public and private sector targets in the U.S. and globally. A chronological listing of significant past attacks provides an empirical basis to assess the nature and severity of these incidents. The types of perpetrators involved in such attacks, their motivations, their weapons and devices (including hoaxes) used in the attacks, and targeting categories of the attacks are analyzed in this article. Best practices to prevent and mitigate the impacts of such attacks, including some of the techniques used by law enforcement and counterparts in the mail and package services to identify and apprehend the perpetrators, are reviewed.

THIS ARTICLE ASSESSES THE NATURE AND IMPLICATIONS of the risk posed by weaponized letter and package attacks, primarily via a country's mail system, against a spectrum of public and private sector targets. In order to better contextualize this issue, this article presents a chronological listing of significant past attacks in the United States and internationally. The types of perpetrators involved in such attacks, their motivations, the types of weapons and devices (including hoaxes) used in the attacks, and the targets are analyzed in this article. As demonstrated by a listing of 27 incidents, a majority of the perpetrators (18) are considered politically-motivated terrorists, while a minority of perpetrators (9) had non-political motives, such as seeking personal revenge against former employers. Most incendiary weaponized letter and package attacks consist of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). A minority of attacks employ non-IED devices, such as chemical agents (e.g. anthrax or ricin), and a considerable number also involve hoaxes intended to intimidate the intended recipient(s). Best practices to prevent and mitigate the impacts of such attacks, including some of the techniques used by law enforcement and counterparts in the mail and package services industry to identify and apprehend the perpetrators, are reviewed.

Weaponized letter and package attacks make up only a small portion of the overall tactics and weapons employed in domestic and foreign terrorist operations against their adversaries.²

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² According to this research note, the majority of weapons used in 2,817 terrorist attacks between 2002 and 2016 in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand employed explosives (49.0%), incendiary devices (33.3%), firearms (9.2%), vehicles (5.4%), and miscellaneous (3.1%). Although authoritative figures are not

However, they present a significant threat and are likely to persist because of the relative simplicity of acquiring and assembling such devices, the ease of sending them undetected via mail and parcel services, and the potential to generate widespread public anxiety and fear among their target(s), even if it is a hoax or the payload does not detonate. Given the perceived anonymity of putting a weaponized letter or package in the mail, whether at a postal office or in a postal box, a perpetrator may believe they will not be caught. New detection technologies are being built to better assist law enforcement services in identifying problematic letters and packages, the individuals that sent them, and apprehending such perpetrators – even if it can take some time to “connect the dots”. However, new innovations in weaponizing letters and packages can be expected in this “cat-and-mouse” game in which perpetrators and security service providers are currently engaged.

Chronology of Incidents

The tactic of weaponizing letters and packages by various types of perpetrators to terrorize or eliminate rivals has occurred in the United States and internationally since the 18th century. For example, the first recorded incident occurred in Denmark in January 1764 when a parcel bomb was sent to a ‘Colonel Poulson’ – 11 years prior to the formation of the U.S. Postal System by the Second Continental Congress in 1775.³ In a notable spate of such attacks in the United States, anti-government anarchists sent a series of mail bomb packages throughout 1919 that targeted politicians, including Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and powerful Wall Street figures like J.P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller.⁴ This chronology of incidents spans events since the early 1970s to the present day, organized by incidents in the United States and international incidents.

Incidents – United States

May 25, 1978 to April 24, 1995: Beginning on May 25 1978 and ending on April 24, 1995, Theodore Kaczynski, 36, (known as the "Unabomber"), killed three persons and injured 23 others with a series of package bombs delivered via the mail service that targeted universities, airlines, and newspapers.⁵ He used the mail system to deliver nine of his 16 known devices.⁶ Kaczynski was a former university professor of mathematics turned environmentalist anarchist and domestic terrorist, who believed that his bombings were necessary to call attention to how modern technologies and scientific research have destabilized society, increased psychological suffering, and eroded human freedom. While still on the loose, a break in the case occurred when, in cooperation with authorities, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published Kaczynski’s diatribe against technological advancement (known as the “Unabomber Manifesto”) on September

available, it can be assumed, based on the 7 U.S. domestic and international incidents listed in this article during this timeframe that weaponized letters and packages constituted a small percentage of the overall use of explosive and incendiary devices used in this database’s listing of terrorist attacks. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320260053_Use_of_Firearms_in_Terrorist_Attacks_Differences_Between_the_United_States_Canada_Europe_Australia_and_New_Zealand.

³ <https://www.economist.com/international/2010/11/04/going-postal>.

⁴ <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/1919-day-bomb-plot-helped-spur-1920-deadly-wall-st-blast-article-1.145630>.

⁵ For an account of Ted Kaczynski’s bombing activities, see Jim Freeman, Terry Turchie, Donald Max Noel, *Unabomber: How the FBI Broke Its Own Rules to Capture the Terrorist Ted Kaczynski* (History Publishing Company, 2014).

⁶ <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/behindthebadge/unabomber.html>.

19, 1995, in exchange for an end to his violence. It was at that time that David Kaczynski recognized the manifesto as his brother's writing and notified law enforcement authorities. This led to the FBI-ATF task force's eventual identification of his cabin in Montana, leading to his arrest on April 3, 1996.⁷ On January 22, 1996 Kaczynski accepted a plea agreement sentencing him to life imprisonment without parole.

February 13, 1987: John Buettner-Janusch, 64, was a physical anthropologist and former university professor, who had previously been convicted in 1980 on several counts of harboring an illegal drug operation in his university laboratory.⁸ Buettner-Janusch sought revenge for the drug conviction and anonymously mailed poisoned Valentine's Day chocolates, which arrived at the home of U.S. District Court Judge Charles Brieant, Jr. on February 13, 1987, nearly killing his wife, who had assumed they were intended for her. The chocolates contained atropine and sparteine. DNA tests proved that Buettner-Janusch, whom the judge had convicted several years earlier, was his would-be assassin. Buettner-Janusch also sent similar boxes of poisonous chocolates to several of his former colleagues. He pleaded guilty in 1988 and was sentenced to 20 years, but died in prison four years later.

December 16, 1989: Walter Leroy Moody, Jr., 55, sent a mail bomb to U.S. Federal Judge Robert Smith Vance, killing him upon opening the parcel in his home in Birmingham, Alabama.⁹ His wife was also seriously injured. Moody also sent a mail bomb to Atlanta, Georgia attorney, Robert Robertson, who was killed by the explosion. Moody was motivated by his resentment of the court system ever since he was convicted in the 1970s of possessing a bomb that had hurt his wife when it detonated and subsequent interactions with Vance. In 1997 he was sentenced to death by execution, which took place on April 19, 2018.

September 18 – October 15, 2001: In the immediate aftermath of al Qaida's 9/11 attacks, a batch of several letters containing anthrax bacterial spores were dropped at a mailbox in Trenton, New Jersey. Two letters, which reportedly contained a more potent form of anthrax, arrived at the offices of Senator Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy on October 15.¹⁰ Letters were also sent to the offices of news organizations and U.S. Congressional lawmakers. The attacks killed five people and injured 17 others.¹¹ Several copycat hoax letters were reportedly sent by others. During the course of a seven-year investigation, Bruce Edwards Ivins, a senior biodefense researcher who had worked with anthrax at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Frederick, Maryland, was suspected of mailing the letters, but no definitive conclusion had been reached at the time.¹² The motive for the letter attacks has also not been conclusively proven, with one possibility being Ivins may have viewed the letters' impact as an opportunity to rejuvenate interest in his anthrax vaccine program that was facing closure. He committed suicide in July of 2008.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For an account of John Buettner Janusch's attack, see <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/04/nyregion/john-buettner-janusch-67-dies-nyu-professor-poisoned-candy.html>.

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/us/alabama-execution-walter-leroy-moody.html>.

¹⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/anthrax-letters>.

¹¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/anthrax-letters-terrorized-nation-now-decontaminated-public-view-180960407/>.

¹² For an account of Ivins, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/us/04anthrax.html>.

January 2007: John Patrick Tomkins, 42, a machinist in Dubuque, Iowa, who called himself "The Bishop" sent several threatening letters to investment firms and advisors between 2005 and early 2007. In January 2007, he mailed an unassembled bomb package to two financial firms in the United States. He was reportedly motivated by his worsening financial situation thinking that attacking financial institutions would lower their share prices, thereby increasing the value of his speculative bets against them. He was arrested on April 25, 2007 and received a 37-year sentence.¹³

April 15-17, 2013: James Everett Dutschke, 41, of Aberdeen, Mississippi, a martial arts instructor with an unstable work history, mailed ricin-laced letters to then-President Barack Obama, Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi, and Mississippi judge Sadie Holland. Reportedly, he had sent the letters in order to frame his personal rival.¹⁴ In May 2014 he was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

May 2013: Shannon Guess Richardson, age 40-41, a Texas actress, was arrested for sending ricin-laced letters to then-President Barack Obama, then-New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and Mark Glaze, the Director of Mayors Against Illegal Guns.¹⁵ Her motivation was reportedly to frame her husband for the attacks while going through their divorce. In July 2014, she was convicted and sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment.

March 2018: Daniel Frisiello, 25, of Beverly, Massachusetts sent several letters containing a white powder to Donald Trump Jr.¹⁶ The letter was opened by Trump Jr.'s then-wife, Vanessa Trump, inside their Manhattan, New York apartment. This was not the first time Frisiello had sent white-powder letters, as he had reportedly sent a white-powder letter to family members of then-presidential candidate, Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign, threatening that if Trump did not drop out the next letter would not be fake. In September 2018, Frisiello pleaded guilty to 13 counts of mailing a threat to injure a person of another and six counts of false information and hoaxes.

March 2018: Mark Anthony Conditt, 23, of Pflugerville, Texas, was unemployed at the time he began his campaign of mailing IED-laden packages to several homes in Austin, Texas, including leaving several packages on front porches.¹⁷ Two persons were killed and five were injured. Five months later, on August 28, he blew himself up when he realized police were closing in on him. Conditt left a video confession and reportedly did not have any terror- or hate-related references in the confession. His exact motivation remains undetermined.

October 1, 2018: William Clyde Allen III, 39, of Logan, Utah, a U.S. Navy veteran, had sent letters containing ricin to high officials in President Trump's Administration. On October 3, he

¹³ See, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ndil/pr/iowa-man-sentenced-37-years-prison-mailing-pipe-bombs-and-threats-investment-firms-bid>

¹⁴ <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/05/james-everett-dutschke-ricin-barack-obama-106840>.

¹⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/shannon-guess-richardson-actress-jailed-for-18-years-after-mailing-ricin-spiked-letters-to-us-9611491.html>.

¹⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-who-sent-powder-trump-sons-others-gets-5-years-n996646>.

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/21/us/austin-explosions/index.html>.

was charged with seven counts for sending the letters.¹⁸ The motivation for his letter attacks was unknown at the time, but he reportedly had previous encounters with the court system.

October 2018: Cesar Sayoc, Jr., 56, of Aventura, Florida, embarked on a several weeks long mailing of 16 explosive-laden packages against two former presidents, public figures, and media organizations such as CNN. He reportedly had a long criminal history. On October 26, he was arrested and charged with federal crimes, including interstate transportation of an explosive.¹⁹

Incidents - International

August 17, 1982: The South African government reportedly mailed a parcel bomb to the Mozambique home of Ruth First, a leading anti-apartheid activist in South Africa, who was living in exile at the time.²⁰ The parcel bomb killed her.

August 1985: David Sticovich, Rotorua, New Zealand, an estranged husband, sent a parcel containing sticks of gelignite to the home of Michele Sticovich, his wife, killing her, while a friend standing nearby was seriously injured. He was arrested and ultimately pleaded guilty to her murder.²¹

October 19, 1986: Nigeria's former leader, General Ibrahim Babangida, reportedly was responsible for sending a package bomb to Dele Giwa, a Nigerian journalist and editor of the *Newswatch* magazine, killing him.²²

April 1990: The South African government's Civil Cooperation Bureau allegedly sent a letter bomb, that was hidden inside two religious magazines, to Michael Lapsley, a priest, severely injuring him.²³

December 1993 - December 1995: During a two-year period, Franz Fuchs, 40, of Graz, Austria, mailed a total of 24 IED-laden letter bombs to Austrian politicians, including the mayor of Vienna, and others, killing four persons and injuring 15. Fuchs was reportedly a xenophobic activist. At his trial on March 10, 1999 he was sentenced to life in prison. On February 26, 2000, he committed suicide in his prison cell.²⁴

September 12, 1996: Ricardo López, 21, an Uruguayan-American pest control worker, based in Hollywood, Florida, sent a letter bomb, containing explosives and sulfuric acid, to the London, England home of Björk, an internationally famous Icelandic singer. The bomb did not reach her as it was intercepted by London Police. López was reportedly an obsessed fan of Bjork who

¹⁸<https://www.justice.gov/usao-ut/pr/allen-charged-seven-count-federal-indictment-threat-use-biological-toxin-weapon>.

¹⁹<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/nyregion/mail-bomber-cesar-sayoc.html>.

²⁰<https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/ruth-first-assassinated-mozambique>.

²¹<https://www.newshub.co.nz/nznews/former-top-rotorua-cop-dies--2009112219>.

²²<https://www.pulse.ng/news/local/dele-giwa-and-the-32-yr-old-haunting-mystery/djkryk7>.

²³<https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/father-michael-lapsley-anglican-priest-injured-letter-bomb>.

²⁴<http://murderpedia.org/male.F/f/fuchs-franz.htm>.

became angry over her relationship with another musician. López died by suicide before the police could apprehend him.²⁵

January – February 2007: Over a three-week period, Miles Cooper, 27, of Cherry Hinton, near Cambridge, England, a primary school caretaker, sent seven letter bombs to public institutions and private companies he believed were involved in creating a ‘surveillance society.’ Nine people were injured by the letter bombs. On February 23, 2007 Cooper was arrested and in late September of that year was sentenced to prison.²⁶

August 11, 2007: Adel Arnaout, 27, a Lebanese immigrant, of Ontario, Canada, sent three letter bombs to several individuals with whom he had legal entanglements, with the first letter bomb arriving on August 11. Reportedly, he aspired to become an actor, which was a dream he believed those individuals had deliberately sabotaged. He had also sent four cases of poisoned water to talent agencies, a bank, and a judge. On August 30, 2007, he was arrested and on March 7, 2012 was sentenced to prison.²⁷

March 1 – April 15, 2011: Trevor Muirhead, 42, and Neil McKenzie, 43, from Ayrshire, Scotland, allegedly sent parcel bombs to Paul McBride, an attorney; Neil Lennon, a Celtic football club manager; and Trish Godman, a former Labour Party Member of Parliament. Both men were reportedly hardline Protestant loyalists and anti-Celtic Football Club (and anti-Catholic) extremists. They were arrested in May 2011 and convicted at the High Court in Glasgow, Scotland and on March 30, 2012, were sentenced to imprisonment.²⁸

February 2014: Seven letter bombs were allegedly sent by the Northern Ireland-based the ‘Real IRA’ dissident splinter faction to British Armed Forces recruitment offices in England. the United Kingdom.²⁹ No other information was available about the senders’ identities or their motivation.

September 2015: At least six people were killed and dozens injured in explosions at 15 locations in Liucheng County in China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The explosives were concealed inside express delivery packages.³⁰ No other information was available about the senders’ identities or their motivation.

March 15, 2017: A package with an explosive mechanism that was mailed from Greece and addressed to Wolfgang Schäuble, a German government minister, was intercepted by German authorities. On the package, the name of a prominent German politician was written as the “sender.” “The Conspiracy of Cells of Fire,” an extremist anarchist organization claimed responsibility of the attack.³¹ No other information was available about the senders’ identities or their motivation, as well as the name of the “politician” whose name was listed as the sender.

²⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ricardo_L%C3%B3pez_\(stalker\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ricardo_L%C3%B3pez_(stalker)).

²⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/sep/27/ukcrime.davidbatty>.

²⁷

https://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2012/03/07/toronto_judge_declares_letter_bomber_adel_arnaout_a_dangerous_offender.html.

²⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-17869217>.

²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/feb/17/new-ira-sent-bombs-army-recruitment-centres-britain>.

³⁰ <https://www.rt.com/news/317030-china-massive-blasts-liuzhou/>.

³¹ <https://www.thenationalherald.com/154689/parcel-explosives-sent-schaeuble-cited-nd-vp-georgiadis-sender/>.

March 16, 2017: An explosive mechanism-laden package that had been sent from Greece arrived at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) offices in Paris. It exploded, injuring an employee. It was reportedly intended for the IMF's Director. The name of another prominent German politician was written on the package as "sender."³² No other information was available about the senders' identities or their motivation, as well as the name of the "politician" whose name was listed as the sender.

May 25, 2017: A letter bomb exploded inside the car of Lucas Papademos, a former Prime Minister of Greece, injuring Papademos, his driver, and another passenger. The explosive device was placed inside the envelope, which was in Papademos's possession, and had detonated while the car was driving in Athens.³³ No other information was available about the senders' identities or their motivation.

January 2019: Envelopes containing threatening letters and a powder, believed to be potassium cyanide, were sent to more than a dozen Japanese companies. One of the letters had threatened to distribute drugs laced with potassium cyanide, unless a ransom was paid in Bitcoin. The targets included the Asahi and Mainichi newspapers and pharmaceutical companies. A food company in the northern city of Sapporo was also targeted. The names on the envelopes were former leaders of the Aum Shinrikyo who had been executed the previous year for their 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway.³⁴ No other information was available about the senders' identities or their motivation.

March 5, 2019: Three suspicious packages that contained homemade bombs capable of igniting a small fire were found in and around transport hubs in London, England. These included Heathrow Airport, a mail room at Waterloo Station on Cab Road, and the City Aviation House near London City Airport (LCY). A fourth explosive device was discovered at the University of Glasgow. The three packages were described as similar: all midsize white envelopes with padded manila envelopes inside. These attacks were followed by another suspect package that arrived on March 22 at a mail sorting center in Limerick, Ireland.³⁵ Though still under investigation, it was suspected that NIRA, an IRA dissident splinter faction, may have been responsible for the letter bombs.

Tactics and Weapons

It should be noted that the likelihood of an organization or individual receiving a weaponized letter or package is extremely rare. As an illustration, although a timeframe is not provided, according to the U.S. Postal Service, it had investigated "an average of 16 mail bombs [annually] over the last few years," while it had "processed over 170 billion pieces of mail," so "the chances that a piece of mail actually contains a bomb average far less than one in 10 billion!"³⁶

³² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/16/world/europe/paris-imf-bomb.html>.

³³ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/former-greek-prime-minister-lucas-papademos-injured-explosion-car-n764651>.

³⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-crime/suspected-potassium-cyanide-sent-to-japanese-newspapers-drug-and-food-companies-media-idUSKCN1PN08U>.

³⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/05/world/europe/london-transit-bombs.html>.

³⁶ <https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov/raddocs/bombs.htm>.

A perpetrator deciding to weaponize a letter or package makes a variety of decisions that are involved in selecting the tactics for an attack. These include:

- Delivery mechanism. Should an envelope or a package be used? A letter is usually a standard No. 10 envelope, and is designed to contain a flat object, such as folded sheets of paper. A package is the size of a parcel or a box.
- Delivery method. Should the letter or package be sent via mailbox or hand-delivered to a post office? Using a mailbox facilitates anonymous delivery, whereas at a post office the sender would have to interact with a window clerk.
- Payload. A letter bomb may be designed to explode immediately on opening or damage could be inflicted by the recipient making contact with its contents, such as a letter containing a poisonous chemical or biological agent. If a hoax is intended, perhaps just material that represents something more malicious, such as talcum powder, could be used.
- Detonation. Should a package containing an IED be employed, such as a pipe bomb, what triggering mechanism should be used that sets it to explode upon opening?

Based on the U.S. and international incidents listed in this article’s chronology, it appears that almost an equal number of attacks involved sending either weaponized letters or packages to their intended victims. As demonstrated by Table 1 (below), in the 11 U.S. domestic attacks, four letters used anthrax or ricin, one letter contained a hoax powder, while of the 6 weaponized package attacks, five contained bombs, while one contained a non-IED poison consisting of poisonous chocolates. In one of the package bomb attacks, in addition to mailing some of them, a few of the packages were left at their intended victims’ porches or mailboxes and intended to look as though they were dropped off by a parcel delivery service. Internationally, of the 16 attacks, seven of the attacks featured letter bombs, one featured potassium cyanide, while eight were bomb-laden packages. Of the eight package bombs, two were allegedly sent by the then-Apartheid-dominated South African government, while one was allegedly sent by a former government leader in Nigeria. Finally, five of the attacks involved cross-country letter- and package-laden bomb explosives.

	<u>Domestic</u>	<u>International</u>
<u>Total Incidents</u>	11	16
<u>Weaponized Letters</u>		
Anthrax/Ricin	4	0
Hoax Powder	1	0
Potassium Cyanide	0	1
Bombs	0	7
Total	5	8
<u>Weaponized Packages</u>		
Bombs	5	8
Non-IED Poison	1	0
Total	6	8
<u>Alternate Delivery Methods</u>		
Impersonating Mail	1	0
Cross-Country	0	5

Table 1

Overall, the delivery advantage for an attacker is to write an address on an “innocent looking” envelope or a package and expect it to arrive days later at the specified address of the intended individual or organization, anywhere domestically or internationally, where it is set to cause terror or actual harm through chemical agents or explosive devices once opened or interacted with. This mode of attack has transformed a country’s postal service and private package delivery companies into unwitting vectors for the perpetrators’ violence.

Motivation

Several motivation types drive perpetrators to employ weaponized letters and packages in their attacks. One of the first motivations to be examined is whether it is perpetrators’ intent to “send a terrorizing message,” whether politically driven or of a non-political nature, or to inflict physical and emotional casualties on their intended targets? Thus, of the 11 attacks in the U.S., 10 were intended to inflict casualties and one was a hoax, while internationally, all 16 of the attacks consisted of weaponized letters or packages.

Another motivation for employing the postal service to deliver an attack is anonymity. This might be due to the relative ease of acquiring and assembling weaponized letters and packages, and what they might perceive to be the relative low risk of being identified as the sender(s) since it is difficult for law enforcement authorities to trace such perpetrators. This method may also enable the sender to circumvent other defenses like security gates and locked doors, since mail is generally implicitly trusted and delivered straight to the target. This was the case with several of the international incidents listed above, such as in Greece and Britain, where the perpetrators had reportedly not been apprehended. In the case of Ted Kaczynski, it took almost 18 years for the U.S. authorities to apprehend him.

A spectrum of radical ideologies is another motivation, whether far-right-wing, far-left-wing, or single-issue philosophies, such as environmental extremism such as Theodore Kaczynski (late 1970s until 1996). Even though many extremist ideologies contain conspiracy theories, there are other cases where the perpetrators’ conspiratorial theories are just too confusing to be categorized. Examples of such far-right-wing perpetrators include William Clyde Allen III (October 1, 2018).

Some perpetrators are motivated not by extremist political beliefs but by personal vengeance. Jilted spouses or lovers, or terminated employees, might seek revenge against their perceived “wrongdoers.” Judges might also be targeted by defendants seeking revenge for their perceived wrongdoing of their court decisions. Examples include John Buettner-Janusch (February 13, 1987) and Walter Leroy Moody, Jr. (December 16, 1989).

Widespread media coverage of their attacks is a considerable motivator for many perpetrators, eager for the attention that the use of such tactics and weaponry can generate, thereby amplifying their “message” to a large audience. Terrorism, caused by widespread panic and anxiety beyond the localized incident, is the goal. This was the case with all the incidents listed in this sample, particularly the post 9/11 anthrax letter attacks, as well as the October 2018 bomb-laden package attacks, with the wider audience believing that if they cannot safely open their mail, they cannot feel safe anywhere.

A final motivation is the desire to extort ransom from their intended victims. This was the case with the January 2019 letter threats in Japan by remnants of the Aum Shinrikyo cult that included a demand for ransom to be paid in Bitcoin.

Categories of Attackers

Several types of attackers employ the tactic of weaponized letters and packages. Domestically, they tend to be lone actor attackers, as opposed to centrally organized groups or loosely affiliated local networks of foreign terrorist groups. Overall, from the early 1990s to around 2015, lone actors accounted for six percent of all terrorists in the U.S. — but they were responsible for 25 percent of all U.S. terrorist attacks.³⁷ Social isolation may be why lone actors are typically able to evade arrest for longer periods of time than terrorists who act in groups—they tend to draw less attention. An example of such a lone actor terrorist includes Cesar Altieri Sayoc (October 2018). Internationally, however, of the 17 incidents, nearly half were likely carried out by individuals belonging to terrorist groups in attacks in China, Greece, and Northern Ireland.

Financial Impact on Organizations

Being targeted by weaponized letters and packages is disruptive and costly for affected organizations, whether in the public or private sectors. Of the 11 U.S. attacks, with eight targeting public sector organizations or individuals and three targeting private sector organizations or individuals, the associated actuarial insurance and other liability-based costs of such attacks are an important consideration for a private organization's human resources, legal, and security departments. In other cost estimations, for example, the U.S. Postal Service refused to accept packages or letters bigger than 12 ounces for about six days at the beginning of Ted Kaczynski's campaign.³⁸ In late 2001, with the U.S. already on edge after the 9/11 attacks, the envelopes containing anthrax spores that arrived at media companies and Congressional offices resulted in high public and private costs associated with their decontamination, which were estimated at about \$320 million.³⁹ In addition, this campaign also set off a trend of copycat attacks, with envelopes stuffed with talcum powder and baking soda generating additional costs in ensuring their safety. Although it was too early to formulate an accurate estimate, it is likely the Cesar Sayoc attacks in October 2018 cost several million dollars for the responding organizations.

Mitigation Methods

Several mitigation methods are employed to identify suspicious weaponized letters and packages. In the U.S., major innovations were instituted in the aftermath of Ted Kaczynski's almost 18-year long mail attack, including the development of new detection technologies to identify and safeguard the country's mail system.

An example of protection at the post office level is the U.S. Postal Inspection Service's National Forensic Laboratory, which is staffed with forensic scientists and technical specialists who investigate the identities and locations of such senders. They perform investigations such as handwriting, paper type, and fingerprint analyses to uncover a sender's unique signature. For example, it is reported that Sayoc's social media postings had included some of the same misspellings that were noticed on the packages he had sent. The postal service's laboratory can also conduct physical and chemical tests on bomb debris that might lead to larger discoveries that enable them to identify possible suspects. Private sector delivery services also deploy in-house security units to investigate weaponized letters and packages.

Also examined is the identity of potential individuals who might be involved in delivering the packages. For instance, they may try to track down the courier in order to identify possible

³⁷ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/pipe-bomb-lone-wolf-terrorism/>.

³⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/mail-postal-service-bombs/555440/>.

³⁹ <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/bsp.2010.0053?src=recsys&mobileUi=0&journalCode=bsp>.

linkages to their original senders. At the postal sorting facilities where such mail may have been sent, advanced technology surveillance cameras might also catch the individual dropping off a suspicious letter or package. This was the case with the Austin bomber who was identified when he dropped off one of his package bombs on March 20, 2018.

Related technological advances in biometric fingerprint and DNA detection of such senders, including the automated capability to digitally reverse engineer the transport movement of mailed packages, and make it possible for law enforcement authorities to quickly identify and apprehend such threat actors. This was the case with Sayoc, who was identified as a potential suspect within days of the IED packages' detection, leading to his arrest.

Mitigating the Impact for Potential Private Sector Recipients

With the U.S. Government's weaponized letter and package mitigation program well-developed, and the U.S. Postal Service's investigative arm (as well as other government investigative services, such as the U.S. Secret Service and the FBI) working with the private sector, it is still up to private sector to implement their own protective programs. There are several measures for the private sector to mitigate the risk of weaponized letters and packages that might threaten their employees and facilities.

First, if a prominent person or organization fits the profile of being a possible recipient of weaponized letters or packages, those individuals and organizations should be trained to not open packages that are unexpected, that appear suspicious, or come from an unknown sender. Ensure that colleagues are also instructed on how to identify and physically handle such suspicious letters and packages.

Some suspicious indicators include the following:⁴⁰

- A missing return address
- An item from an unknown or unusual location
- A misspelling of an address
- A return address that is different from the location from which it was mailed
- A package that is taped excessively
- A wire protruding from a package
- A package that emits a suspicious odor due to the presence of chemicals
- A letter or package that does not feel "normal", such as containing unusual plastic or metallic components as opposed to typical paper or bubble stuffing
- Unusual sounds emanating from the package, such as a buzzing or ticking noise

Second, an organization's internal mail screening/handling and package delivery acceptance procedures should be reviewed to ensure consistency and efficient response measures for suspicious mail/package incidents. Updates to security awareness training should include safe handling and notification procedures if a suspicious package/envelope arrives. Security precautions should also be aligned to heightened national/local threat environments, including industry sector specific recommendations. Thus, for example, if certain sectors, such as media communications or financial institutions, are being targeted by a wave of weaponized letters and packages, then the organizations and companies in those sectors should take special precautions to protect themselves as well.

⁴⁰ This listing of suspicious indicators is based on https://www.wrc.noaa.gov/wrso/security_guide/mailbomb.htm.

Third, companies and organizations need to establish an interdisciplinary threat assessment team to identify, assess, and manage potential threats against them by individuals who might harbor a grievance against them – or their general sector – that could lead to a weaponized letter/package attack.

Finally, there should be well-established processes in organizations and companies for responding to suspicious letters and packages, whether they are sent to employees' offices or homes. These include establishing cooperative relationships with appropriate public safety authorities, such as an organization's security department, local police, a local postal inspector, or other relevant investigatory agencies so that if an incident occurs, established procedures are in place for a quick mitigation response.

Conclusions

The frequency of weaponized letter and package attacks is rare relative to other forms of violence (only eight of the 2,817 terrorist attacks reported between 2002 and 2016 were identified as being a weaponized letter or package attack; see footnote #1), but they continue to occur. Because they are a low probability, but high consequence risk, public and private sector organizations and companies need to anticipate the full spectrum of potential threats that might challenge them, and to effectively protect their employees and facilities from such "postal" threats. To do so effectively, they need to allocate appropriate budgets for mailroom security, conduct risk assessments against a spectrum of such threats that might challenge them, implement appropriate security programs, exercise them regularly, and thereby minimize the potential impact to their employees and facilities if a weaponized letter or package attack occurs.