

## Anthrax Case: The Mystery Remains

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The overall anthrax episode has somehow addressed the grief of the victims of anthrax attack in the US but the shoddy investigations and the foreclosure of the investigations have raised few questions which needed to be addressed like what was the main motive of the accused and who were the actual perpetrators of such an attack. The anthrax case of US in the post 9/11 phase has raised the issue of the protection of biological agents programme and the scientists involved in such clandestine operations.

In early August 2008 most of the US newspapers were highlighting the 'suicide' of the marked man suspected for his involvement in the spread of anthrax through letters in 2001. The FBI has stated that as the suspected scientist knew that he was likely to be indicted and charged with the spread of anthrax, he committed suicide. The chemical which was found in his blood during the post-mortem report was Tylenol, which caused his liver failure over several days. While investigations were launched against many suspected scientists including Steven Hatfill, one of the colleagues of Ivins and even the name of Dr. Philip Zack was listed under 'suspected' category. But this investigation has many threads attached to it. While investigations were launched it was revealed that the anthrax laced letter sent to the Capitol Hills offices contained chemical additive known as bentonite and the presence of bentonite in the anthrax was compelling evidence that Iraq was responsible for the attack as 'bentonite' was a trademark of Iraqi Leader Saddam Hussein's biological weapons program'. It was also speculated that in such form of attack there was a significant role of a state or the anthrax spores were stolen from the former Soviet Union Programme.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently even stories appeared in US media that it was attempt by Ivins to test the effectiveness of anthrax. On the other hand few suggested that it was a commercial ploy gone bad. It was stated that in March 2000, Ivins and other army specialists filed to patent a method of making a genetically engineered anthrax vaccine. The patent was awarded in May 2002. In the wake of anthrax attacks, the US government contracted with the California Company VaxGen to manufacture 75 million doses of the vaccine at a total cost of \$ 87 million. Vaxgen's chief executive said his company was licensed to use the manufacturing method created by Ivins and other army specialists. Although it is common for scientists working for government laboratories and private corporations to apply for patents to protect inventions developed while on the job, it is relatively uncommon for those individuals to benefit personally from products developed and sold as a result of those patents<sup>2</sup>. Even the chief executive of the company endorsed the same view.

On the one hand while the death of Ivins has resulted in the investigating agency like FBI not able to reach any concrete results while on the other hand the FBI spent years attempting to prove that Steven J. Hatfill, a researcher at the same laboratory, had committed the anthrax attacks before agreeing last month to a US\$ 5.8 million out-of-court settlement of his privacy lawsuit. Ivins had come under scrutiny of FBI agents after eliminating the other suspects. His house and office was searched and his co-workers were interviewed about his access to anthrax powder and his odd behaviour. But there were questions raised about the lack of solid evidence to indict Ivins. This makes the whole investigations murkier. The whole episode also has one more angle of the victims' version.

The victims and the accused did not get the required hearing and the case was closed abruptly. The announcement came within a fortnight of the death of Ivins. The victims felt that not proper investigation was made into the case and as was expected there is a spurt in law suits for compensation because it has now been confirmed that the anthrax strain was leaked from the bio defence laboratory of US security establishment. National Security experts had said that they have long suspected the anthrax outbreak could be traced to the country's own bio-defence programme because of the nature of the spores and the way the letters had been prepared. Elisa D. Harris, ex member of National Security Council, stated that it is critical to identify the source of the material and how the security measures at US facilities lapsed, where the anthrax was processed and how many persons were involved. This showed that a country like US which has always championed against the weapons of mass destruction could not secure its own labs from the internal sabotage. This exemplifies the role of the security agencies and the scientists who have become vulnerable to the external influences and so there is a need for proper mitigation of such attacks and full investigations, so that conclusive results could be procured and the concerns of the victims could be addressed.

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and the foreclosure of the investigations have raised few questions like what was the motive of the accused and who were the actual perpetrators of such an attack. Many victims and their kin have raised the issue of improper briefing by the FBI officials and how there are questions which needed to be answered. Above all these things one thing is important that the full case file of the anthrax case would be an interesting reading without any prejudice.

The anthrax case of US in the post 9/11 phase has raised the issue of the protection of biological agents programme and the scientists involved in such clandestine operations. On the one hand while US case does seem to have been resolved but this has also opened up a Pandora's Box of ideas which can threaten the whole city and even psychologically cripple the whole system as has happened in the US during those attacks. But this case has typecast the post investigation scenario as the victor, the vanquished and the victim.

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