

Case 16: JFK Airport

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The plot to blow up fuel pipelines serving the JFK airport was unusual in that the conspirators were older than the norm. Also in that they were neither social nor political outcasts nor former jailbirds—though the informant supplied by the FBI for the case does fit that characterization.

More typical, however, was the daffy infeasibility of the plot, the inability of the plotters to put it into motion, their absence of practical knowledge, and their apparent incomprehension about its essential absurdity. They also lacked effective connections to people who might be able to help them out on any of these scores. Indeed, as Bryan Straub points out, the leader of one group they tried to enlist deemed their plot “insane” and predicted, accurately as it turned out, that the plotters were likely to fall victim to an entrapping informant.

Perhaps because it was concocted in an area known for its theatrics and spot-lit self-obsession, the plot—which has both those qualities in full measure—generated a great deal of studied and very public hand-wringing. As with many plots, however, the question lingers: if simply left alone and to their own highly limited devices, would they ever actually had done anything at all?

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1. Overview

A loosely associated group of conspirators of Guyanese descent planned to attack John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) and the fuel pipelines that serve it. Because the pipeline runs under a heavily populated area of the boroughs, the men hoped to inflict serious damage. Although the actual plot was only vaguely imagined, the suspects traveled extensively and allegedly made important contacts in the months leading up to their arrest in June 2007. An FBI informant infiltrated into the group provided the bulk of the evidence used against them. The men were arrested when one of the conspirators attempted to board a plane bound for Iran. Led by a former cargo handler at JFK, Russell Defreitas, the suspects pled not guilty to all charges including conspiring to attack a public transportation system. They were convicted of multiple crimes.¹

2. Nature of the adversary

The conspirators in this case are considerably older than the norm, not outcasts seeking a place in society nor politically un-represented. Moreover, none had criminal records or had served in time in jail.

Russell Defreitas is considered the mastermind of the plot and the driving force behind the formation of the group interested in the attack. According to his former friend Trevor Watts, Defreitas grew dreadlocks, proclaimed himself a Rastafarian, and embraced Islam in the late 1990s.² Others have described his propensity for get-rich-quick schemes, which he often thought about, but apparently never put into practice.³ Defreitas was reportedly impacted by the horror of the 9/11 attacks.⁴ Watching on television, he apparently stated that he could not understand how terrorists could kill so many innocents.⁵ Originally from Guyana, Defreitas frequently returned there for holidays. Before being laid off in 2001, Defreitas worked as a supervisor for a cargo contractor at JFK international airport, after which time he took odd jobs.⁶ It is unclear how he managed to fully make a living after he lost his job. At the time of his arrest, he was 62 years old, a U.S. citizen who had lived in New York for over 30 years.

Abdul Kadir, in his 50s at the time of arrest, is a former mayor of Guyana's second largest city (Linden) and former Member of Parliament in Guyana. He converted to Islam in college and finished his technical degree in

¹ Madeleine Gruen, "A NEFA Report on the JFK Plot," NEFA Foundation, November 2008, 2.

² Benton Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas et al." Cr. No. 07-543 (DLI). United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, March 8, 2010, 18. Available from the NEFA Foundation.

³ Jess Wisloski, Xana O'Neill, and Dave Goldiner, "I was so close to evil & didn't know," *New York Daily News*, June 4, 2007.

⁴ Quoted in Wisloski et al., "Close to evil" The credibility of these comments is questionable.

⁵ Ibid. Corresponds to his later assertion that the attack should minimize the loss of life.

⁶ Gruen, "NEFA Report," 2.

civil engineering at the University of Guyana. He spent time in Venezuela before receiving a further degree in civil engineering. His political career blossomed in the 1990s—he served as mayor between 1994 and 1996 and as an MP in 2001. He was an imam at a Shia Islamic Center which allegedly received funding from Iran.⁷ Identified by an intermediary, he was thought to have connections in Venezuela and Iran that would be useful in the plot.⁸ Numerous photos of Kadir and his nine children with high powered weapons as well as some ammunition were found in his home. At his trial, he denied he was a militant Muslim or an Iranian spy. He claims he sought only funding for a mosque from his connections with Defreitas; however, no funds materialized.⁹

Kareem Ibrahim is a 62 year old man charged as a co-conspirator in the plot. A citizen of Trinidad, Mr. Ibrahim converted to Islam at the age of 21. He was employed as a musician and later an accountant, a position from which he retired in 2005. Additionally, he served as the imam for two Shia mosques in Trinidad and sold Islamic texts as a hobby. He is apparently claustrophobic—he has refused to fly on an airplane since the 1970s and was recently hospitalized for a nervous breakdown.¹⁰ He has known co-conspirator Kadir for over 20 years. He advised the conspirators to allow him to contact trusted associates in Iran or the United Kingdom to see if they were interested in funding or assisting with the plot.¹¹

Abdel Nur is a 57 year old Guyanese citizen who was deported from the U.S. in the late 1980s on drug trafficking charges. He is described as an extremely devout Muslim who attended daily prayers. He provided connections and money transfers in the plot.¹² The conspirators originally felt that Nur would be the most appropriate to contact prospective terrorist group allies in the Caribbean because of his connections to their leaders.¹³

Besides these four men, seven other “associates” are identified in court documents with varying minor connections.¹⁴

3. Motivation

Defreitas stated that all Muslims should be part of a fight against a “war on Islam.” According to the informant, Defreitas was angered by the sight of military weapons being shipped to Israel during his time at JFK because he felt they were being used to kill Muslims. Defreitas also suggested a Jewish school or community as a potential target.¹⁵ He thus appears to be anti-Semitic in addition to being opposed to U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel.

4. Goals

⁷ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 3-4.

⁸ Campbell et al., “United States v. Defreitas,” 6.

⁹ “2 JFK Airport Bomb Plot Suspects Convicted,” CBS News, August 2, 2010.

¹⁰ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 2-3.

¹¹ Campbell et al., “United States v. Defreitas,” 10.

¹² Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 4.

¹³ Campbell et al., “United States v. Defreitas”

¹⁴ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 5.

¹⁵ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 10-11.

By blowing up the jet fuel tanks, igniting the airport, and causing damage to the surrounding area, the conspirators hoped to create mass terror and economic catastrophe.¹⁶ In addition to the immediate costs of the damage, Defreitas remarked that an attack on JFK airport would be like “killing the man twice” because “anytime you hit Kennedy, it is the most hurtful thing to the United States. To hit John F. Kennedy, wow. . . . They love John F. Kennedy like he's the man. . . . If you hit that, the whole country will be in mourning.”¹⁷

5. Plans for violence

Nicknamed the “chicken hatchery” or the “chicken farm,” the plot sought to destroy JFK airport and cause significant damage to Queens by blowing up the jet fuel tanks and pipeline that supply the airport.¹⁸ In order to minimize the loss of life, particularly of women and children, the conspirators noted that they should carry out the attack in the morning, perhaps on Christmas Eve. They wanted the primary consequences to be economic, rather than human casualties.¹⁹ According to the informant, Defreitas desired to shoot down a passenger jet with a rocket when he worked at the airport but lacked the means to do so.

Beginning in 2007, Defreitas and the informant made several information-seeking visits to JFK to select targets and to evaluate security. It was determined that the control tower would need to be disabled for the attack to be carried out because the security personnel working in it were responsible for monitoring the fuel tanks as well as the roadways surrounding the airport. Additionally, the conspirators suggested releasing rats in the airport to distract security personnel, although it is unclear how they planned to do this.²⁰ From his time working at the airport, Defreitas had some knowledge of the security at JFK.²¹

Although they discussed various options, the conspirators possessed no weapons at the time of their arrests. The group seemed to be stuck on the nature of the fuel tanks and the specifics required to blow them up to ignite the fuel. They thought, from observation and background knowledge, that the fuel tanks were double tanks made of titanium, which would require two explosions to ignite. The use of chemicals to dissolve the metal were also discussed, but with no real thought was given to the practical implications of such a method of attack.²² Kadir was believed to have some knowledge of pipeline construction from his background in civil engineering.²³

As outlined in the legal brief produced by the government for the trial, the fuel tanks at JFK airport are supplied by the Buckeye Pipeline, the primary transporter of jet fuel to JFK, delivering fuel from Allentown, Pennsylvania

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Anthony Faiola and Steven Mufson, “N.Y. Airport Target of Plot, Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2010.

¹⁸ Campbell et al., “United States v. Defreitas,” 7.

¹⁹ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 7.

²⁰ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 8.

²¹ Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 5-7.

²² Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 7.

²³ Ibid.

through New Jersey, Staten Island, and Queens.²⁴ At the airport, the fuel tanks are clustered in two groups away from runways and the passenger terminal. It is unlikely that a fire in the fuel tanks would result in damage to the terminal itself. Moreover, experts were quick to point out that the pipeline would not explode without oxygen and that safeguards were built into the system to prevent contagion should one section ignite.²⁵ A spokesperson for the pipeline's owners commented on the safety measures and security features built into the system, noting that the fuel tanks are separated from the pipeline by a cutoff valve, which could be activated if a fire were to occur in either. Furthermore, the pipeline is sealed; fire would require oxygen to ignite and burn the fuel. "To say that the pipeline would blow up is just not possible," the spokesman remarked.²⁶ In 1990, a fuel tank fire at Denver's Stapleton International Airport burned for two days, consuming more than 3 million gallons of fuel. Although the total cost was estimated between \$15 million and \$20 million, no one was injured.²⁷

6. Role of informants

As with many domestic Islamic terrorist cases, the FBI hired an informant. Steven Francis²⁸ was 36 years old in 2007 and had worked with them since 2004. According to court documents released on thesmokinggun.com, Francis was convicted of possession as well as conspiring to kill the leader of a rival drug gang in 1996. For this charge, he spent approximately 6 years in jail and may have been released as part of a earlier informant plea bargain.²⁹ In 2003, the long-time cocaine dealer was convicted of possessing over two million dollars of cocaine.³⁰ Now convicted twice of drug trafficking charges, Francis agreed to cooperate with the government in exchange for a reduced sentence and money.³¹

Francis played a direct, influential, and controversial role in both the formation of the plot and the subsequent case against the suspects, and provided the conspirators with leading information to advance their plot.³²

According to the government brief prepared for the trial, Francis was recruited by Defreitas in August 2006 to conspire to attack the airport even though he had no specifically relevant knowledge or connections. Later in the month, Francis traveled to Guyana at the invitation of Defreitas, where he met with the co-conspirators and discussed plans for an attack. In early January 2007, Francis and Defreitas made four trips to JFK airport in Francis' car to survey the fuel tanks and the control tower making a video record. Defreitas and Francis then returned to Guyana, presented the video, discussed further plans for an attack, and later presented the plot to Kadir. Later, Francis purchased the necessary plane

²⁴ Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas," 3-4.

²⁵ Wisloski et al., "Close to evil."

²⁶ Faiola and Mufson, "N.Y. Airport Target of Plot."

²⁷ Faiola and Mufson, "N.Y. Airport Target of Plot."

²⁸ "2 JFK Airport Bomb Plot Suspects Convicted," CBS News.

²⁹ Carol Eisenberg, "JFK informant's \$2M cocaine arrest," *Newsday*, June 14, 2007. Available from InVenice.net. The original court document is no longer available at thesmokinggun.com

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Gruen, "NEFA Report," 11.

³² Gruen, "NEFA Report," 11.

tickets to meet with the leadership of a radical Sunni Muslim group based in Trinidad in May 2007. After accompanying Defreitas and Nur to the meeting, Francis returned to New York with Defreitas.³³

He provided the conspirators with Google Earth images of the fuel tanks and surrounding area. Furthermore, he provided an apartment for Defreitas, paid for by the government. According to a CBS News account, Defreitas was living in Guyana until he was lured back to New York by an offer of a free apartment provided by Francis.³⁴ Extensive conversations between the conspirators taped by the informant formed the majority of the evidence used in the case.

Arguing that the informant led the development and excessively encouraged the plot, Defreitas' lawyer stated, "I think it was clear these guys couldn't act on their own . . . and didn't act on their own."³⁵ Although entrapment is legally difficult to define or prove, there have been other terror related cases where it formed the bulk of the defense's argument. The defense in this case did not seek to have the case dismissed for entrapment, however, because it was felt that the role of the informant was not as substantial as in other cases.

7. Connections

The group sought out the experience and support of a radical Sunni group based in Trinidad, Jamaat al-Muslimeen (JaM). JaM tried to stage a coup there in the 1990s and has been involved in a fair amount of organized crime, but it has never participated in international terrorism activities. Nur purchased an airline ticket with the intention of meeting with JaM leadership in January 2007, but was unable to travel because he lacked proper documentation.³⁶ Although the JaM's leader was on trial at the time, the conspirators (and Francis) decided to fly to Trinidad to meet with the group anyway in May 2007.³⁷ Government documents allege that the four men had successfully gained access to an international terrorist network, relied upon its knowledge, expertise and contacts to form the plot and gather operational support.³⁸ The leader of JaM later stated that the plot was "insane" and that he feared entrapment by the U.S. government.³⁹

For assistance, Defreitas, Kadir, and Francis discussed contacting Adnam Shukrijumah, an al-Qaeda operative and explosives expert who was believed to be hiding out in the Caribbean at the time.⁴⁰ According to the government's legal brief, Ibrahim sought connections with the revolutionary movement in Iran as well as with an associate in the United Kingdom. These sources were to provide

³³ Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas," 4-11.

³⁴ "2 JFK Airport Bomb Plot Suspects Convicted," CBS News. This information does not match other accounts. It is unclear how much time Defreitas spent in the United States and Guyana respectively before the informant became heavily involved in 2006.

³⁵ Quoted in "Two convicted in JFK airport bomb plot," BBC News, August 2, 2010.

³⁶ Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas," 6.

³⁷ Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas," 8-9.

³⁸ Faiola and Mufson, "N.Y. Airport Target of Plot."

³⁹ Gruen, "NEFA Report," 9.

⁴⁰ "2 JFK Airport Bomb Plot Suspects Convicted," CBS News. Shukrijumah is a known terrorist who has since been indicted in connection with the Najibullah Zazi's plot to bomb the New York subway (Case 21), presumably for helping to train Zazi in Pakistan,

money, which was going to be deposited in the mosque's bank account held by Kadir.⁴¹

8. Relation to the Muslim community

Kadir was arrested in route to Iran via Venezuela. A number of his children had been to Iran and studied there. It is somewhat unclear if he had connections of value in Iran.

9. Depiction by the authorities

Reactions of public officials have been viewed in many cases to be alarmist and therefore generated controversy. Bruce Schneier, an expert on terrorism in the United States, wrote a scathing editorial in *Wired* magazine shortly after the arrests characterizing the modern terrorist as an "idiot." Drawing upon the comments from U.S. Attorney Roslynn Mauskopf, who stated at a press conference that the JFK case was "one of the most chilling plots imaginable," Schneier criticizes the tendency of public officials to inflate the threat posed by would be terrorists.⁴² Attorney Mauskopf continued, "The devastation that would be caused had this plot succeeded is just unthinkable."⁴³ Senator Arlen Specter added, "It had the potential to be another 9/11."⁴⁴ The Assistant Attorney General for National Security also sensationalized the plot and stoked fear when he claimed, "The defendants sought to combine an insider's knowledge of JFK airport with the assistance of Islamic radicals in the Caribbean to produce an attack that they boasted would be . . . devastating."⁴⁵

In contrast, New York's Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, downplayed terrorism fears, stating, "You can't sit there and worry about everything. Get a life. . . You have a much greater danger of being hit by lightning than being struck by a terrorist."⁴⁶

10. Coverage by the media

Extensive coverage in the *New York Times* was rather rational and fair given the proximity to the case. Additionally, most major national domestic newspapers carried stories of the case as it developed. A Guyanese newspaper account was markedly aggressive, claiming that intelligence and security related measures should be increased in light of the plot.

The *New York Daily News* was more sensational, running a human interest piece about a waitress who served Defreitas and Francis before the arrests. "I was so close to evil—and it never even hit me," Sharon Fitzmaurice contemplated.⁴⁷ The account describes Defreitas as both the "mastermind" and "the architect of a plot to kill thousands of New Yorkers"—an obvious stretch.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas," 11.

⁴² Bruce Schneier, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot," *Wired*, June 14, 2007.

⁴³ These comments also appear in the *Washington Post*. Faiola, "Target."

⁴⁴ Schneier, "Portrait."

⁴⁵ Quoted in Faiola and Mufson, "N.Y. Airport Target of Plot."

⁴⁶ Quoted in Schneier, "Portrait."

⁴⁷ Wisloski et al., "Close to evil."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Immediately after the arrests, the *Washington Post* sounded the alarm: “the charges provided yet more evidence of the threat posed by homegrown terrorists, embittered extremists who hail from the Middle East or, in this case, from the Caribbean and northeastern South America.”⁴⁹ It continued, “the four men tapped into an international terrorist network, utilizing its knowledge, expertise and contacts to devise the plot and to obtain operational support and capability to carry it out.”⁵⁰

Supposed terrorism consultant, Paul Kurtz, stated on CBS News’ Early Show that, “This is a growing trend we need to be worried about it—individuals who are sitting on the fence who are willing to take up arms against us.”⁵¹

11. Policing costs

The informant in the case worked for the FBI for at least three years and was provided resources to gather evidence against the conspirators. Additionally, the government provided housing for Mr. Defreitas. The costs of intelligence gathering, extradition, and the trial must also be considered. The suspected arrested abroad were extradited to the United States in June 2008, and were found guilty in August 2010—over two years later.⁵²

A request for an anonymous jury and additional protective measures for jurors was made by the U.S. government in the case.⁵³ Specifically, the U.S. attorneys argued that the high profile of the trial, the dangerous nature of the defendants, and the nature of the charges warranted this extra security.⁵⁴ Jurors were to be kept together as a group during trial recesses as well as provided lunch and transportation through the trial process.⁵⁵

12. Relevance of the internet

The *Washington Post* reported that officials claimed the case points to the ability of would-be terrorists to utilize the internet to find like-minded individuals and gain assistance.⁵⁶ However, the conspirators actually made little use of the tool—although Google Earth was accessed by the informant, Francis, to collect overhead photographs of the airport.

13. Are we safer?

Because anxiety and fear gripped the nation following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the eventual reaction was to declare America under siege. Led by the government, would-be terrorists seem to be imagined, created, poked and prodded into handy guilty convictions that can be sold to rationalize the public’s continued fear. After the failure to uncover any meaningful presence of al-Qaeda

⁴⁹ Faiola and Mufson, “N.Y. Airport Target of Plot.”

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Paul Kurtz, “Foiled Terror Plot Analysis,” with Julie Chen. The Early Show, CBS News. June 5, 2007.

⁵² Gruen, “NEFA Report,” 14.

⁵³ Campbell et al., “United States v. Defreitas,” 2.

⁵⁴ Ibid. Similar accommodations have been made in other terrorism related trials.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Faiola and Mufson, “N.Y. Airport Target of Plot.”

in the United States, they seem to have shifted their focus to a more chilling enemy: the homegrown terrorist. Never mind that the majority of the so-called homegrown terrorists turn out to be idiots, merely angry at some aspect of American culture and foreign policy who would have otherwise no means to attack the United States, let alone in spectacular fashion. The arrest of these men does little to make America safer on the whole; however, the continued insistence by the government and the media that terrorism poses an existential threat to the United States generates unnecessary alarm.

14. Conclusions

Any threat actually presented in this case is largely a fantasy. Specifically, this group of conspirators had no connections to organized groups or practical knowledge about how to carry out the attack they fancied. Although the men may have understood the economic and symbolic value of their ideal scenario, they lacked the common sense to understand that it was impossible.

The defendants were charged with conspiracy to attack a public transportation system, conspiracy to destroy a building with fire and explosives, conspiracy to attack aircraft and aircraft materials, conspiracy to destroy international airport facilities, and conspiracy to attack a mass transportation facility. Additionally, Defreitas and Kadir were charged with conducting surveillance of a mass transportation facility with intent to attack that facility.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, the costs of the case and the consequences for the continued obsession with terrorism were not worth the minimal gain of putting these men behind bars. Until Americans demand a rational assessment of the true terrorist threat, the continued threat inflation will serve government, the security industry, and media interests well.

⁵⁷ Campbell et al., "United States v. Defreitas," 3.