

America's Bomb Culture

Christopher John Farley

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Some New Jersey teenagers fax two bomb threats to their high school in an alleged attempt to extort \$1.3 million. In the home of one of them, police find a bombmaking manual called Jolly Roger's Cookbook, which, they say, had been downloaded from the Internet. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, a live grenade is found in a newspaper-vending box; a day later, police discover an 8-in. pipe bomb on a bridge. These incidents, which happened last week and caused no injuries, may seem almost mundane compared to tragedy on the scale of the Oklahoma City blast and the notoriety of the Unabomber. Yet they represent a far more insidious danger: America's growing fascination and familiarity with bombs. In real life and in the movies, exploding devices have become commonplace. Joseph Grubisic, the commander of the Chicago police department's bomb squad, has seen an increase in bomb use by Cook County gangs and drug rings. His unit coined the term MacGyver bombs to identify a class of homemade devices he believes were inspired by the TV series. "We get a dozen or so a year," he says.

Grubisic's experience is reflected in the data collected by the fbi's Bomb Data Center, which counted 1,880 bombings in 1993, up from 442 a decade earlier. In 1993, bombs killed 43 and injured 281, up from 29 dead and 230 wounded two years earlier. The increase does not take into account the six deaths and 1,042 injuries caused by the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, about half the bombing attempts in 1993 were acts of vandalism, 13% were intended as revenge and fewer than 1% were acts of protest.

A significant factor in the increase in bombings is that the dissemination of bomb know-how has become a minor industry. The past few decades have produced the rise of mail-order publishing companies that serve the so-called gun aftermarket, including the gun fanciers, survivalists, wannabe cops and closet anarchists who like to shop for such products as laser sights, camouflage, fake badges and fake fbi and atf hats. Some of their most popular offerings are "burn-and-blow" books that describe in detail how to make landmines, booby traps and bombs. "The information is available on the Internet and everywhere else," says retired atf agent Al Gleason, who spent 50 years investigating bombings. "People who feel that the bomb might be their weapon of choice now have the information to make one."

One of the earliest and most successful products of these publishers is the Anarchist Cookbook, which was put out in 1971 by Lyle Stuart Inc. But to bomb-squad commanders, the most notorious publisher is Paladin Press in Boulder, Colorado, founded in 1970 by two Special Forces veterans of the Vietnam War. The company carries a catalog of 40 books and videos on how to make explosives, including the Improvised Munitions Black Book series-repackaged versions of military manuals with instructions for building explosives. Paladin's list also carries Homemade C-4: A Recipe for Survival, about which one catalog edition says, "Serious survivors know that the day may come when they need something more powerful than commercial dynamite . For blowing bridges, shattering steel and derailing tanks, they need C-4."

Burn-and-blow publishers argue that there is no correlation between their material, which often carries the caveat "for information purposes only," and the increasing rate

of bombings across the nation. "I sell a thousand books, but there ain't a thousand explosions," says Billy Blann, the owner of Delta Press Ltd. of El Dorado, Arkansas. The flurry of orders after the Oklahoma bombing for the pamphlet *Improvised Munitions* from Ammonium Nitrate, he says, is "just armchair people who want to know what's going on."

Hollywood too has become fascinated. With gunplay so common in real life, producers have turned to bombers as the villains du jour. On TV, the season finale of *Melrose Place* features a character who sets off a bomb at the apartment complex that houses the show's cast. The ABC soap opera *All My Children* contains a story line in which a character has been planning to bomb an ex-lover on his wedding day. In the wake of the Oklahoma bombing, producers of the soap opera say they are altering the bomb angle, while *Melrose Place*'s producers are considering the same measure. At the movies, the new Chuck Norris film *Top Dog* begins with the bombing of an apartment building by neo-Nazis. Due May 19 is the Bruce Willis thriller *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, which opens with the bombing of a department store. Bombings have been featured in *Speed*, *Blown Away* and *The Specialist*. Moviemakers contend that they are merely reflecting reality. Says Graham Yost, the screenwriter for *Speed*: "We looked at bombings taking place all around the world and basically brought the conflict home to America." Tragically, real-life bombers may be doing the same thing. —Reported by Erik Larson and Jeffrey Ressler/*New York* and Elaine Shannon/*Washington*

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