

Another Professor Hurt by a Mail Bomb

Ken Hoover & Louis Freedberg

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A world renowned computer scientist was seriously injured yesterday when a mail bomb exploded at Yale University, a day after a similar blast injured a distinguished University of California at San Francisco genetics professor at his home in Tiburon.

The FBI is looking for a connection between the two bombings and also is investigating possible links between the Tiburon bomb and the unsolved case of a dozen mail bombs, some that were sent to university researchers, between 1978 and 1987.

The Tiburon case has "similar forensic characters" to the dozen bombings that killed one person and injured 21 across the nation, said Rick Smith, the FBI spokesman in San Francisco. He would not elaborate.

FBI Director William Sessions, at a news conference in San Francisco, said the FBI is sending computer notices to universities across the country urging caution when opening packages.

He urged academics to be on the lookout for packages with oily stains, emitting strange odors, protruding wires or markings such as "personal" or "confidential" and bearing unfamiliar return addresses or illegible handwriting. All, he said, are telltale signs of a mail bomb.

David Gelernter, 38, a Yale assistant professor, was critically injured when he opened a package in his fifth-floor office at Arthur K. Watson Hall, the university computer science center. He suffered wounds to his abdomen, chest, face and hands and underwent surgery at Yale-New Haven Hospital.

UCSF's Dr. Charles Epstein, a highly regarded geneticist whose research has contributed to understanding mental retardation, remained in stable condition yesterday at Marin County General Hospital.

The 59-year-old scientist opened a padded brown envelope at the kitchen table of his Tiburon home Tuesday afternoon. A bomb, apparently designed to detonate when the envelope was opened, exploded. FBI authorities said he lost three fingers on his right hand and suffered abdominal injuries and a broken right arm.

Gelernter is the author of a computer language called Linda that gives personal computers more power. He has written widely on computer issues.

Late yesterday afternoon, Gelernter's brother, Joel, a psychiatrist and geneticist, received a telephone threat at the Veterans Administration Hospital in West Haven, Conn. The caller told the woman who answered the phone "You are next," referring to Joel Gelernter. Joel Gelernter is also a Yale professor.

VA authorities searched his mail but did not find a bomb.

The investigation into the earlier attacks was code named UNABOM because at least five universities were among the targets. Two blasts occurred at the University of California at Berkeley, in 1982 and 1985.

The only reported fatality came in 1985, when the owner of a Sacramento computer store was killed when a parcel delivered to his store exploded. Another attack was directed at the president of United Airlines.

In addition to the bombings at UC Berkeley, mail bombs in the 1980s went off at Northwestern University in Chicago, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

One bomb that was defused at the Boeing Corporation in Auburn, Washington, had been mailed from Oakland.

In the wake of the bombing, universities around the state yesterday urged mail sorting staff and others to exercise care when opening packages. Many are coordinating their activities with local police departments responsible for responding to bomb emergencies.

"We were alarmed at the two events involving UCSF and Yale professors, and because of that we have given our mail division and our receiving division notice to be alert to any suspicious packages," said Bob Sanders, a UC Berkeley spokesman. Sanders said the university was already taking precautions because of the earlier attacks on the campus.

Sessions said the investigations into the Yale and Tiburon bombings could take a long time. He drew comparisons to the bomb that killed an Alabama judge in 1989 that eventually led to the bomber's capture.

"It was very careful, detail by detail, on every single facet of both the composition of the bomb (and) hundreds of thousands of records," Sessions said.

The New Haven and Tiburon explosions are being investigated by agents from the FBI, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and postal inspectors. Officials are reluctant to conclude that the events are related.

"I don't think any of us are willing to say conclusively that this is part of the same bombing," said Daniel Mahelko, chief spokesman for the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the post office's law enforcement arm. "To confirm that there is any connection would be premature."

However, officials suggested that the kind of devices detonated at Yale and Tiburon are similar to those used in a string of bombings that mysteriously ceased in 1987. At the time, authorities speculated that the serial bomber was a disgruntled academic or student, an angry airline employee or someone whose job was displaced by a computer.

Both Berkeley bomb blasts went off in Cory Hall, the campus' main engineering building. In 1982, a professor of electrical engineering was seriously hurt but eventually recovered from his injuries. In 1985, a graduate student received serious injuries when he opened a plastic box containing the bomb.

Postal officials said they thought that all the attacks were the work of the same person because the detonation devices were similar. They would not reveal details about the devices, but the explosives in the 1985 Berkeley incident were encased in a plastic box three inches high by six inches wide. The 1982 device consisted of a rectangular metal container with explosives and flammable liquid.

Although the letter bombs have led universities to be more security conscious, postal authorities said letter bombs remain rare.

They said that between 1981 and 1993, 190 explosive devices were sent through the mail. Of those, 67 exploded, resulting in 57 injuries and nine deaths. Seventy of the incidents resulted in arrests.

The post office's Mahelko cautioned against undue alarm to the bomb attacks on the UCSF and Yale professors. He said that of 160 billion pieces of mail handled by the Postal Service last year, 10 mail bombs were discovered, resulting in four injuries and one death.

"The chances of getting a mail bomb are very, very remote considering the billions of pieces of mail we handle each year," Mahelko said.

In addition, Mahelko said that last year, there were 435 incidents in which devices such as pipe bombs were placed by hand in mail boxes or other mail receptacles but not actually delivered through by mail. Almost 300 of those went off, but only five people were injured.

He said it is not necessary for people to take special precautions, unless they feel they might be targets. "Unless we can put some link between the Tiburon and New Haven cases, there aren't any special precautions that need to be taken," he said.

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The San Francisco Chronicle, section A, page 1. <www.unabombers.com>

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