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Before I go any further, I must declare an interest. In the late 1990s, I had occasional professional dealings with the US Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) and on occasion I met Bruce Ivins in passing. I also met many of the various people mentioned in the book. I was always impressed by the professionalism of USAMRIID's staff and was certainly one who really wanted to doubt that they were the source of the 2001 anthrax attacks.

After many years of ruminating in silence, I think it's time for me to revisit the anthrax terrorism of late 2001, the so-called 'Amerithrax' incident and the strange case of one Dr. Bruce Ivins. After all, the landscape the *CBRNe World* readership has become accustomed to was partly formed in the aftermath of the anthrax-laden letters. Only five people were killed and less than two dozen were taken ill and, while this is still tragic, this is a relatively small number compared with the damage that could have been caused, leaving one to marvel at the strategic impact of this singular event. How many of the billions that have been spent on the "B" in CBRNE since then would have been spent had the Amerithrax case not happened? Certainly, the worldwide CBRNE community has shown remarkable resilience in its propensity to drip funds on things that haven't actually happened. But when something does happen, the floodgates open and I sat in some of the meetings in late 2001 and early 2002 when this first began to happen.

The tipping point in breaking my ten year sulk on the subject was reading the book *The Mirage Man: Bruce Ivins, the Anthrax Attacks, and America's Rush to War* (Bantam Books, 2011) by David Willman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist. *Mirage Man* is hard to put down and

extremely well researched, based on exhaustive interviews that are well annotated. It is a powerfully written book and a very engaging look at the Amerithrax investigation in all of its strange twists and turns. The greatest strength of the book is the compelling biography of the presumed and alleged perpetrator, Dr. Bruce Ivins. Willman's copious end-notes leave the impression that he has left no stone unturned and detractors will find it very hard to find many gaps in his research. In the interests of objectiveness, he has made a good effort to point out various alternative opinions that exist. Willman goes to great lengths to substantiate the facts about Dr. Ivins and avoids the temptation of chasing too much idle speculation. If you're the type of person reading articles in *CBRNe World*, you will really learn something from *Mirage Man*.

Reading *Mirage Man* forced me to re-examine some questions from both the attacks and Dr. Ivins suicide. I'm not the only one with questions. After Ivins killed himself and robbed the world of the chance of a formal trial, several interesting inquiries have been held. A National Academy of Sciences (NAS) committee has reviewed the scientific aspects of the case. Another panel of experts, the 'Expert Behavioral Analysis Panel' led by the psychiatrist Dr. Gregory Saathoff, has probed the behavioral, toxicological and psychological aspects of Dr. Ivins' life and alleged acts. The NAS report is available online for download, as is a redacted report from the behavioral panel. For those who have plenty of time on their hands, the internet is also full of fascinating conspiracy theories ranging from the thoughts of reasonable-sounding sceptics to the crackpot ramblings of the reptilian-Freemason-Knights Templar sort.

First, there are questions of guilt. Did Bruce Ivins murder five people? I do not think we will ever know for

certain, but it seems to me likely that he did. Some serious people believe that this conclusion is a leap of faith however, and Ivins certainly has some vociferous defenders. The case against Ivins is certainly more solid than it ever was against the unfortunate Steven Hatfill (about whom there is more later). The US judicial system not only requires a standard of proof 'beyond reasonable doubt', but also settles many cases before trial through negotiation and plea agreements. A case such as the US vs. Ivins capital murder trial would have dragged on for years. 'Reasonable doubt' may have allowed for room for manoeuvre by a competent and aggressive legal defense team.

Perhaps my slight nagging doubt about 'reasonable doubt' is caused by the lack of closure. It would have been interesting to see what the lawyers would have done at a trial. It would have made the OJ Simpson trial look like a sideshow. There is a large amount of circumstantial evidence and Ivins is a very strange and profoundly disturbed man who certainly acted in strange and occasionally illegal ways. The fact remains, however, that the physical evidence is somewhat tenuous and there are no witnesses to him actually perpetrating any of the alleged acts.

The lack of closure also raises the issue of attribution. If we can't conclusively tie the anthrax letters to Ivins, despite the best efforts and seven years of investigations, does this cast doubt on our present and future capabilities to attribute a future attack on a terrorist group or Nation State? [*Hopefully mistakes made in the early days of the case would not be repeated in future ones. Practice makes perfect! Ed*]

Dr Ivins' mental status raises a lot of issues. There's no doubt in my mind that Dr. Ivins was clearly mentally ill and had been so for a very long time.

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Both *Mirage Man* and the behavioral panel lay out compelling evidence that Dr. Ivins was a strange and troubled man. If all of us have some baggage in our psyches, by comparison, Dr. Ivins needed a platoon of Sherpas to carry his. He had strange ideas and perverse obsessions, such as a lifelong fixation with the Kappa Kappa Gamma university sorority and he acted upon his obsessions in disturbing ways, such as criminal behavior (crawling through windows at sorority houses, petty theft) and a staggering degree of substance abuse.

The entire point of security clearances is to help governments keep

people who might do bad things away from positions where they could do harm, yet Dr. Ivins passed security clearance when he was hired and it was periodically renewed. Should this have happened? First of all, it seems that he might not have got clearance in the first place if the rules had been followed. He had already sought help for some relatively serious psychiatric problems at the time of his original hiring as an Army civilian employee. As part of the normal process for a clearance, Ivins signed a release form allowing the government to have access to his medical records. The Army never looked at his psychiatric

records, however, nor subjected him to any mental suitability screening. The government missed repeated opportunities to see that Ivins was dealing with some serious mental health issues that a reasonable adjudication would have held to be inconsistent with a security clearance.

Another issue was one of inconsistent standards. The US government has long had a wide-ranging Personnel Reliability Program for continuous monitoring of personnel with access to nuclear weapons. The US Army has a similar policy in effect for chemical weapons, the Chemical Surety Program. Military personnel and defence

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civilians assigned to the White House fall under a security suitability screening known as 'Yankee White', due to their proximity to the nation's leadership. Personnel who work for the CIA and US Secret Service are subject to polygraph examinations as part of their clearance process. No comparable programmes existed for personnel with access to biological warfare agents however and, arguably, such measures might have flagged Dr. Ivins for scrutiny.

A related question that comes to mind is that of drug screening. Dr. Ivins had serious drug and alcohol problems. He was on many legally prescribed medications but he frequently took them in excess of the prescribed dose and he supplemented his prescriptions with over-the-counter medications and copious amounts of alcohol. Helpfully, the behavioral panel included a toxicologist (Dr. Christopher Holstege) who could review the implications of Ivins' intake, and even the redacted version of the toxicology appendix of the behavioral panel's report is an interesting read. The US government has the authority to subject employees with security clearances and with access to secure facilities to drug screening, both for pre-employment screening and on a random basis but the behavioral panel found that routine drug and alcohol testing did not occur among the civilian employees at Fort Detrick. With comparatively less access to dangerous material, I was compelled to produce gallons of urine for the government over the years of my military and civil service careers. Simply put, if a man subject to random screening is quietly taking a shovel full of pills (only the slightest of hyperboles in this case) and washing them down with copious amounts of vodka, one would think that this is the sort of thing that drug and alcohol screening programs ought to be looking for. The traditional drug screening looks for the abuse of illegal recreational drugs but most of the wide pharmacopeia ingested by Dr. Ivins would not have been picked up by the typical Defense Department screening.

The lack of action taken by co-

workers and managers is also disturbing. People had got used to the fact that Dr. Ivins was a little bit eccentric. The phrase "Bruce was just being Bruce" comes up in testimony, and the fact that he juggled at parties and played the organ at church seemed to outweigh a lot of warning signs in some peoples' opinions. There were episodes of behaviour that were clearly inappropriate and there was a history of direct complaints from staff members to managers. There are parallels in other cases - the Robert Hanssen espionage case comes to mind- where many people were firm in their shock and disbelief at his arrest, but a number of others had long thought he was strange or even "creepy".

Much of *The Mirage Man* concerns the lengthy investigation led by the FBI. This dragged on from 2001 to 2008 without an arrest, accounting for many thousands of investigative man-hours. The book left me wanting to know more about this investigation. It is clear that Amerithrax is symbolic of a problem I'd already witnessed during my years of public service. The FBI is famous among its rivals for its ability to throw large amounts of resources at a case if it wants to: but having more money and more people doesn't always solve the problem any faster. How long did they investigate the Unabomber before the case was cracked? It wasn't the vast amounts of investigative manpower that cracked the case but the bomber's brother 'shopping' him. The Amerithrax investigation got so big that it became cumbersome and bureaucratic and while I am certain that many talented investigators, both scientific and criminal, worked on the case, it got so big that it suffered under its own weight. By breaking the vast amount of investigative work down into small fragments, it became increasingly difficult for any one person to make useful conclusions at the macro level.

The overall architecture of the investigation was not helped by some serious distractions. Some elements of the investigation seem esoteric, such as untested and unscientific use of tracking dogs, draining a lake, the

various unseemly media circuses, odd discrepancies about the physical nature of the powder and the presence or lack of additives. Some leads that seemed to implicate Ivins were ignored or given a low profile. The public pillorying of Dr. Steven Hatfill distracted much investigative effort and was proven, in the end, to be a costly mistake. Not only did Dr. Hatfill clearly not commit the crimes, he's been awarded a considerable amount of money for his troubles, and rightly so. If another biological incident occurs, the FBI is simply going to have to do much better.

The Ivins situation raises questions about the dangers of insider threat. Many people have access to materials such as anthrax and the post-9/11 and post-Amerithrax political climate has actually served to greatly increase the numbers of people and institutions that have active access to dangerous biological materials. According to Willman's investigations, as many as 15,000 people may be working with biological warfare agents in the US today, a many-fold increase since pre-9/11 days. Has the threat of insider attack actually increased as a result of the Ivins case?

None of the issues I've already discussed answer the un-answered questions, however. If Ivins did it, did he act completely alone? Were there other letters that were not discovered? How do we account for the deaths of Kathy Nguyen and Ottilie Lundgren? Why did the anthrax spores seem to get everywhere in the mail system but not in the alleged perpetrator's house or possessions? Just how much did the Amerithrax case feed the rush to war in 2003? I sense that Willman's book will not be the last on this affair.

Finally, what do we have to show for it all? The irony is that the US government seems to have acted to fulfill Dr. Ivins' supposed motive. Anthrax got onto the agenda and it is still on the agenda. Governments around the world have ploughed billions into biodefense. We've reacted to the acts of a lone insider by putting many more people into a position to do the same thing.