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## DOPE, NOT ROPED

*More losers get hurled, or hurl themselves, at America. Should we tremble?*



By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Since 9/11 the FBI has to all appearances enjoyed a remarkable string of victories against terrorism. From the [Fort Dix Six](#) and the [Liberty City/Sears Tower Seven](#), to the [Rumble in the Bronx](#), the Feds have served up case after neatly-wrapped case of would-be bombers whose inner sanctums had been infiltrated by the Government from the very start.

Planting informers in lead roles, then getting targets to say and do enough to satisfy the elements of a crime has become the favorite way to proceed. Agents keep watch so that no one gets hurt, and dangerous stuff like explosives (duds, of course) is only furnished at the last, carefully choreographed moment. That's when the authorities swoop in, arrest everyone and take back their pretend bombs.

Case closed. Next!

But this time it was different. According to the [New York Times](#), Najibullah Zazi, 24, first came to the attention of FBI analysts in late summer 2009. A native of Pakistan, Zazi [emigrated](#) to New York City in the 90's. By 2005 he had dropped out of high school and was working a coffee cart owned by his father. In 2007 Zazi was regularly visiting Pakistan, where he entered into an arranged marriage and had two children. According to the FBI he would later admit that on his last trip, between August 2008 and January 2009, he took explosives training at an Al Qaida camp.

By then Zazi was in serious financial trouble, having so overspent his credit cards that he was forced into bankruptcy. In January 2009 he moved to Colorado and got a job driving shuttles at the Denver airport. His parents joined him in July. Thanks to store security cameras and after-the-fact interviews it's known that in August he and possibly as many as three associates ran around Aurora beauty supply stores buying

products whose ingredients were in a bomb-making recipe that FBI agents later found in Zazi's laptop.

When Zazi suddenly packed up a rental car on September 9, 2009 the FBI didn't know of these purchases, nor that Zazi had unsuccessfully tried to refine his concoctions in an Aurora motel room. Still, agents must have been aware of his overseas trips. And if Zazi's e-mail and cell phone were already being monitored, as [documents](#) filed in the case suggest, they would have also known that he had been in touch with an unidentified person to determine the "correct mixtures of ingredients to make explosives."

FBI agents tailed Zazi to New York City, where he arrived on September 10. As they still lacked an insider, information was frustratingly sketchy. Fearing the worst, NYPD anti-terror detectives working with the FBI apparently took it on themselves to ask an Imam who knew Zazi to help. Police also stopped and searched Zazi's car as he entered New York. To help FBI agents execute a "sneak and peek" search warrant they later towed the vehicle under pretext. Inside was a laptop that contained detailed bomb-making instructions and a browsing history suggesting that Zazi was looking to buy more chemicals.

Zazi was decidedly no genius. Still, when the Imam tipped him off that police were asking questions he [flew back to Denver](#) and stripped the laptop of its hard drive. Realizing that the jig was up, the FBI emerged from the shadows. Agents interviewed Zazi for two days. Although Zazi insisted that the reason for the trip was to meet with the person who was operating his father's coffee cart, he supposedly admitted training at an Al Qaida camp. Zazi stopped cooperating on the third day, leading the FBI to arrest him, his father and the Imam for lying to federal agents. Zazi was later [indicted](#) for conspiring to set off weapons of mass destruction. As of this writing none of his supposed helpers, an essential part of a conspiracy case, have been named.

In a New York Times analysis entitled "[Terror Case is Called the Most Serious in Years](#)," Karen J. Greenberg, executive director of NYU's Center on Law and Security trumpeted the Zazi case as being "real scary...the case the government kept claiming it had but never did." Other skeptics of past FBI counter-terrorism investigations agree. To be sure, this wasn't the usual [FBI rope-a-dope](#). There was no informer or undercover agent calling the shots. But neither is it comparable to 9/11, the Madrid Bombings or the more recent event in Bombay, which involved cadres of well-trained, highly disciplined terrorists. Poorly educated, bankrupt and holding down a menial job, Zazi was so marginal a figure that even he must have known it.

Of course even hopeless bumblers must be stopped. Zazi likely had associates; [according to MSNBC](#), three New York City men who reportedly helped him buy

chemicals in Aurora are under watch. Had the FBI been able to keep the investigation under wraps Zazi and his friends, if any, might have eventually succeeded in mixing a lethal cocktail. They could have also blown themselves up or hurt others while trying.

Still, we should be wary of elevating hopeless bumbler to the top of the threat pyramid simply because the Government didn't induce them to act. If this ring of incompetents exists, calling it a major threat is a stretch. Even if an Al Qaida connection holds, it's likely just another attempt to hurl as many losers at America as possible, hoping that one will succeed. In any event, the Zazi episode amply demonstrates the difficulty of building a traditional criminal case against terrorists while maintaining a reasonable assurance that things won't literally blow up in one's face. It's far, far more challenging than roping in dopes. Not incidentally, it also promises to produce far fewer "successes."

As for major plots, we hope that the FBI's on them, too. But what happened last week isn't particularly reassuring. In [two unrelated terrorist stings](#), FBI agents arrested Hosam Smadi, 19 and Michael Finton, 29 when they parked vehicles supposedly containing bombs, Smadi in the underground garage of a Dallas (Tx.) office tower, and Finton across from a Springfield (Ill.) Federal courthouse, and then tried to remotely activate the devices. Smadi was first contacted by an undercover agent trolling extremist chatrooms, while Finton was lured in by an informer. And, yes, the vehicles and bombs had been furnished by the Government.