

Police, CIA thwarted 1974 plot to kill Ford

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WASHINGTON — Law enforcement officials, with help from the Central Intelligence Agency, foiled a plot in 1974 to kill President Gerald Ford with nerve gas, according to two chemical weapons experts.

Their story is supported by a Los Angeles police detective who became aware of a threat against the president and helped apprehend the man who made it.

When he was arrested, the detective said, the man was found to have the knowledge and most of the ingredients needed to manufacture a lethal nerve gas.

The claim by the two chemical weapons experts, Neil C. Livingstone and Joseph D. Douglass, is contained in a paper they authored which is to be published in January by the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis in Boston.

According to the paper and the detective, the threat was made by Muharem Kerbegovic, a native of Yugoslavia, who was arrested in Los Angeles in August 1974 and charged in connection with a series of bombings. He was subsequently found guilty of killing three people with a bomb he had planted in a locker in the Los Angeles International Airport.

Kerbegovic became known as the "Alphabet Bomber" because when he telephoned or mailed bomb threats to authorities, he designated each impending explosion with a different letter of the alphabet.

A Secret Service spokesman in Washington said the agency has no record of Kerbegovic's threatening a president.

But senior Detective Arleigh McCree, head of the Los Angeles Police Department's bomb squad and the man who headed that agency's investigation of the "alphabet bombings," said the Secret Service told him at the time that Kerbegovic had made a threat against the president. McCree said there may have been threats against both Ford and his predecessor, Richard Nixon, who resigned Aug. 9, 1974.

In their paper, Livingstone and Douglass write: "In one of the messages . . . the Alphabet Bomber said that he possessed nerve gas and was coming to Washington to kill the president."

From Kerbegovic's description of the nerve gas, Livingstone and Douglass continue, federal authorities concluded there was a "high probability" the threat was real.

"From a room in the basement of the White House," the paper states, "the Secret Service and other federal law enforcement officials coordinated one of the most intensive manhunts in the nation's history. Using sophisticated audio equipment provided by the CIA, extensive psychological profiling, and a thorough review of federal personnel records, the search was narrowed to a single individual located in Los Angeles. So massive was the commitment of federal resources that the entire search took only 18 hours."

When Kerbegovic was arrested Aug. 20, 1974, the authors write, authorities found that "he was not lying. He actually had a homemade nerve agent."

McCree, who said he was aware the CIA had helped analyze voice patterns on Kerbegovic's taped threats, said the bulk of the work that led to his arrest was actually done by Los Angeles police.

He confirmed that when Kerbegovic's home was searched after his arrest, it was found that he possessed most of the ingredients to make a nerve gas bomb.

The only thing lacking was an organic phosphate that, when combined with the other ingredients, would have produced a highly lethal nerve agent, McCree said.

McCree said his investigators found that Kerbegovic had ordered the organic phosphate from a chemical manufacturer "and it had been shipped to Los Angeles and it was just waiting to be picked up. He was that close."

McCree said the nerve gas bomb Kerbegovic planned to manufacture could have killed the president and all those near him if detonated in a public area where he was appearing.

Kerbegovic was not charged with threatening the president because prosecutors felt they had a strong enough case against him on other charges to assure he would be sent to jail, according to McCree.

Livingstone, the chief author of the soon-to-be-published paper, will not name the source of his information on the incident, except to say it came from someone who had been a "senior member" of the Secret Service presidential protection detail during 1974.

"What they were dealing with was essentially a very skilled looney with the ability to manufacture a very rudimentary agent and then have him on the loose in Washington," said Livingstone.

Livingstone said the Secret Service will not publicly acknowledge the threat from Kerbegovic because the agency fears it would encourage "imitative behavior" by others.

His source did not reveal whether Ford was informed of the threat, Livingstone said.