

12-4-1998

# Trends. Letter Bombs in Australia: A Psychological Commentary

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## Recommended Citation

Editor (1998) "Trends. Letter Bombs in Australia: A Psychological Commentary," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 22 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol5/iss22/4>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Trends. Letter Bombs in Australia: A Psychological Commentary

Author: Editor

Volume: 5

Issue: 22

Date: 1998-12-04

Keywords: Australia, Bombs, Mail, Postal System, Terrorism

At least 25 letter bombs have been discovered in the mail systems of Canberra, Sydney, and Melbourne; more may be on the way according to Australian Federal Police. What psychological factors make the delivery of bombs through the postal service such an attractive endeavor to a perpetrator harboring some kind of political grievance?

First, the letter bomb gambit may serve to empower one who feels unempowered. Second, the physical distance between perpetrator and intended victims may facilitate committing an aggressive act much as bomber pilots' aggression is facilitated--or as the notional lethal acts of experimental subjects in Milgram's obedience paradigm. Third, there appears to be a perverse pleasure in employing a system of the political authorities--e.g., the postal system--as part of one's own weapons system that may partially subvert the political authorities. Fourth, the intended victims are usually caught unawares--i.e., there's a terroristic quality to the letter bomb that is characterized by the psychological immediacy of the explosion for the victims and the fear induced in those who are made aware of the attacks courtesy of the mass media. Fifth, significant inconvenience to masses of people can easily occur through the preemptive procedures of law enforcement--reinforcing the sense of empowerment for the perpetrator. A sixth attraction is that the letter bomb attack may serve as a psychodynamic acting out and as an aggressive vehicle compatible with a schizoid personality style that seems to typify at least some perpetrators, such as the United States' Unabomber. This last attraction may largely be unconscious even if psychologically motivating.

Although the Australian Federal Police will likely apprehend the perpetrator(s), there are others waiting in the wings. Much as the advent of postal systems historically facilitated espionage and counterespionage (Polk, 1997), the same has applied to terrorism and homicide. (Thanks to Research Assistant Ashley Wincer for initiating the article's concept and for data collection.) (See Australia's short, violent history of terror by post. (December 3, 1998). *The Age*, <http://www.theage.com.au>; Forensic evaluation of Theodore John Kaczynski. (1998). <http://www.courttv.com/trials/unabomber/documents/psychological.html>.; Grubin, D. (1995). Offender profiling. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, 6, 259-263; Letter bomb terror. (December 3, 1998). *The Canberra Times*, <http://www.canberratimes.com.au>; Meloy, J.R., & McEllistrem, J.E. (1998). Bombing and psychopathy: An integrative review. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 43, 556-562; More bombs feared. (December 3, 1998). *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au>; Polk, W.R. (1997). *Neighbors and strangers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Keywords: Australia, Bombs, Mail, Postal System, Terrorism.)