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SSID Fact Sheet

Bomb Threat Assessments

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When investigators analyze an anonymous threat, they have a broad range of behavior science techniques available to them, such as settlement analysis, psycholinguistics, and forensic stylistics. They also rely on the more traditional forensic sciences, including document examination, finger- and voice printing, and DNA analysis.

When assessing school bomb threats, investigators first should question whether the threat passes the *reality* test, which they should apply to both the threatener and the threat. Though only a trained professional is qualified to render a psychological diagnosis, most people can recognize if an individual is grounded in reality. If the offender makes such claims as "The spacemen inside my head are telling me to blow up the school" or his language is a salad of unrelated or nonsensical words, he may have mental health issues, which could lessen the credibility of the threat.[1] Further, the threat itself may not be grounded in reality. A recent case centered on a well-written note threatening to explode a device at a high school. However, the writer claimed that he would use plutonium, an extremely difficult and dangerous substance to obtain, process, and store. His threat failed the reality test, and neither the school nor the town was evacuated.

Further, threats from purportedly well-organized, violent groups rarely are grounded in reality. In fact, anonymous threateners often invoke the presence of a group, peppering their communications with the pronoun "we" or claiming to have an extensive network conducting surveillance or preparing to carry out the threat. Some threateners believe that having the power of a group bolsters credibility with their victims. In reality, to investigators involved in threat assessment, such language usually suggests a lone offender.

Studying the language of the threat plays a critical role in the second avenue of analysis, looking for *evidence of commitment* to the threat by the threatener. Statement analysis involves studying a subject's language, verbal or written, to detect indicators of deception; uncover hidden, disguised meanings or motivations; or discover areas of sensitivity to the subject. The use of first person active tense and unequivocal language signals a good indicator of commitment. The statement, "At the next pep rally, I will throw

[1]For illustrative purposes and to avoid confusion in the article, the author sometimes refers to subjects as males.

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a homemade pipe bomb filled with black powder after I light the fuse," would carry more weight than "An upcoming pep rally *may* be disrupted by our group carrying *some* high explosives, like gunpowder." In the latter example, the subject uses the passive tense "be disrupted" and equivocation in the statement through the qualifier "may" and "some." This language suggests a lack of commitment on the subject's part.

Investigators also may see evidence of commitment, or the lack thereof, in the details provided by the offender. Has the offender put time, energy, resources, or effort into his plan? For example, does he appropriately describe school security measures and how they may be defeated? Likewise, something as simple as an incorrect address or misspelling of an addressee's name may signal a lack of commitment to the threat. Certainly, if individuals seriously plan to commit a potentially life-threatening crime and expose themselves to criminal prosecution, they would have done some research on their targets.

The details that the subject provides also may assist in the third area of analysis, the *offender's ability* to carry out his threat. An offender demonstrates ability when he provides appropriate and accurate details about his plan or weapon. To individuals assessing threats, providing these essential details establishes the credibility of the threatener. In the previous example of the lesser threat, an error exists in the details; gunpowder is not a high explosive. It sounds scary to say "high explosives," but this statement would reflect the threatener's lack of knowledge, again suggesting low commitment and lack of ability to carry out the threat. In the more serious example, the suspect provided accurate details when describing a basic pipe bomb recipe: pipe, viable explosive filler, and a fuse to initiate the device. He shows that he has knowledge to make a device, and it suggests that he put time, energy, and resources into his plan.

The fourth area of focus is evidence of a *motive*. Does there appear to be a justifiable mission/goal behind the threat? "I'm tired of the jocks picking on younger kids and getting away wit it. Because none of the teachers will do anything about it, I'm going to bomb them!" Investigators should consider this type of statement more seriously than, "Everyone in this town must die, and we'll start with bombs in the high school." The first threat gives an understandable reason for the threatened action. It is specific and targets one group. The second statement is broad and lacks motive. Does this threatener not feel that his friends, family, and even himself fall into the category of "everyone in this town?" Sometimes, people vent their anger and frustration through broad, bold talk. It dissipates the energy that an offender otherwise might use for harmful intent. The first threat also raises interest because the threatener seems to have considered, but run out of, the usual peaceful options when he says, "*Because none of the teachers will do anything about it. . .*" Research suggests that when a subject feels he has no peaceful alternative or means to communicate his grievance, the likelihood that he will act out violently dramatically increases.

Fortunately, in most cases, the motive for these bomb threats involves some type of excitement or gain for the offender and simply making the threat with no intention of ever carrying it out meets the offender's needs. Some people feel a sense of thrill and empowerment if the entire population of a school is evacuated, people feel afraid, and such

authority figures as police and fire personnel arrive at the scene. And, if it is a beautiful spring day, or if school is canceled on a Friday or on a test day, an evacuation can benefit the students as well. The research also suggests that the axiom "most threateners don't bomb and most bombers don't threaten" appears true in most cases. In fact, only a very small percentage of bomb threats to schools results in the deployment of an actual, viable device. Most anonymous bomb threats at schools usually are false alarms.

This information provides only a brief, summary outline of how investigators should assess anonymous bomb threats at schools. It is not intended for those assessing a potential mass act of violence. Applying these principles may help administrators and law enforcement personnel accurately assess the viability and credibility of a threat and appropriately gauge their response. Any credible evidence provided by teachers or peers that one or more students are planning a mass homicide of their schoolmates and teachers needs to be assessed with different measures and afforded a graver concern that the more typical anonymous bomb threat.

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