

Case 11: Nettles

John Mueller

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Angry at a court system that had forced him to spend around 45 of his 66 years in prison, Gale Nettles, a petty and possibly mentally ill counterfeiter, whose creative work in that area has been described by his lawyer as “fairly pathetic” and who seems to have had neither the training nor the ability to create bombs, hatched a plot to blow up the Dirksen Federal Courthouse in Chicago. Not only did he hope by this action to “bring down the federal justice system,” as Rachel Cohen notes, but he was also irritated that the “building blocked the view of the lake.”

Although he had no Islamist ties or interests and seems to have been inspired mainly by Timothy McVeigh’s 1995 attack on a federal office building in Oklahoma City, Nettles, who sometimes went under the name “Ben Laden,” sought out al-Qaeda for financial support. In the process, he attracted not only the attention of a jailhouse informant—a racketeer who received a reduced sentence for his communications work—but three FBI agents, one of whom supplied him with a computer and a printer so he could resume his counterfeiting career and another who posed as a cash-flush al-Qaeda operative.

After 16 months of investigation, Nettles was arrested at the Chicago flophouse where he lived. Found guilty, he was sentenced to 160 more years in prison, mostly for counterfeiting. It seems likely that, in meting out justice, the judge was profoundly unamused by the notion of bombing a courthouse. This case bears quite a bit of similarity to that of Grecula (Case 13) who also sought out al-Qaeda operatives and offered to build a bomb—actually, he said, a “superbomb”—for them. No courthouses, however, were on his proposed target list, and, perhaps consequently, he received a sentence of only five years. There is no word on the quality, or lack thereof, of the view the hapless Nettles will have from his new prison cell.

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1. Overview

On August 5, 2004, Gale Nettles, age 66, was arrested for a plot to blow up the Everett M. Dirksen Federal Building in Chicago using a bomb made with ammonium nitrate fertilizer, similar to the bomb used in the Oklahoma City bombing.¹ While serving time in the Federal Correctional Institute in Yazoo City, Mississippi for counterfeiting, Nettles befriended a fellow inmate, Cecil Brown.² Initially, Nettles and Brown discussed plans to collaborate in counterfeiting schemes after their release, but Nettles eventually revealed to Brown his plans to bomb a federal building due to his bitterness toward the court system.³ Brown reported the plan to prison authorities, who then put him in touch with the FBI, who then put Nettles into contact with an undercover agent.⁴ While interacting with the undercover agent, who Nettles believed to be a farmer with access to ammonium nitrate fertilizer, Nettles also discussed continued counterfeiting.⁵ After Nettles learned that he would be able to obtain inert material that he believed to be fertilizer, he reached out to another undercover FBI agent to attempt to find contacts in al-Qaeda.⁶ He was put in contact with a third undercover FBI agent, to whom Nettles promised ammonium nitrate fertilizer in exchange for financial compensation.⁷ Shortly after selling the agent 1,500 pounds of fertilizer, Nettles was arrested.⁸ On January 12, 2006, he was sentenced to eight consecutive 20 year terms, two for his plot to blow up the Everett M. Dirksen Federal Building, and six for his continued counterfeiting.⁹

2. Nature of the adversary

Nettles spent a large portion of his life in and out of prison, which was, as discussed in the next section, his initial motivation for his plot to blow up the Dirksen Federal Building. According to Ronald Clark, a lawyer who represented Nettles in a counterfeiting case, Nettles spent about 45 years cumulatively in prison before hatching his plan at age 66.¹⁰ Nettles' criminal history included

¹ Jo Napolitano, "Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot," *nytimes.com*, August 6, 2004.

² *United States of America v. Gale Nettles*, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³ Napolitano, "Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot."

⁴ Grace Ramirez, "Chicago man arrested in alleged bomb plot," *cnn.com*, August 6, 2004.

⁵ *United States of America v. Gale Nettles*, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁶ *United States of America v. Gale Nettles*, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁷ *United States of America v. Gale Nettles*, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁸ Ramirez, "Chicago man arrested in alleged bomb plot."

⁹ Associated Press, "Man gets 160 years over Chicago terror plot," *nbcnews.com*, January 13, 2006. The Everett McKinley Dirksen United States Courthouse, or Dirksen Federal Building, houses the U.S. Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, the U.S. Bankruptcy Court, the U.S. Marshal for the Northern District of Illinois, the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, and miscellaneous other court-related offices.

¹⁰ Associated Press, "Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse," *latimes.com*, August 6, 2004.

armed robbery and attempted murder, charges he pleaded guilty to in 1975.¹¹ This criminal history was highlighted by the U.S. government, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Brandon Fox described Nettles as “violent,” citing his criminal history as a factor in the significant length of his sentence.¹² In 2001, he claimed he had unspecified mental disorders, which were not brought up while he was on trial for the plot to blow up the Dirksen Federal Building.¹³ Nettles was not particularly intelligent, and Clark described his counterfeiting to be “fairly pathetic.”¹⁴ At the time of his final arrest, he was living in a transient hotel in Chicago, where other residents said that he was “hard to read.”¹⁵

3. Motivation

Nettles had a very simple motivation for his original plot; he wanted revenge on the court system that had placed him in jail for such a large portion of his life, specifically his sentence for counterfeiting.¹⁶ This tied directly into his choice of target, the Everett M. Dirksen Federal Building, which houses many of Chicago’s courtrooms. Nettles was not motivated by any general anti-American sentiment, even though he later attempted to reach out to anti-American terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and Hamas.¹⁷ His motivation in doing so stemmed from a desire to profit financially, and financial profit is a secondary motivation running throughout his entire plot.¹⁸ This is evidenced by his continued counterfeiting, as well as his attempt to sell excess fertilizer to undercover FBI agents who he believed to be in al-Qaeda.¹⁹ Nettles’ final alleged motivation is even simpler; he told Gary Beasley, an undercover FBI agent, that he wanted to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building not only because he wanted to bring down the federal justice system, but also, because the building blocked the view of the lake.²⁰

Although Nettles went by the pseudonym “Ben Laden,” presumably in reference to the al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, there is no evidence that he was religiously motivated to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building.²¹ He did not speak of any such motivation, and while in prison, he discussed his plans with fellow inmate Cecil Brown, citing motivation only from his own prison sentences in the past.²² Even though he reached out to groups that were religiously motivated, he gave no indication of aligning with their views, and apparently did so in the hopes of profiting, and gaining assistance, from them.

¹¹ Associated Press, “Man who hated feds gets 160 years for courthouse plot,” *usatoday.com*, January 13, 2006. The text of the decision, which states charges, plea, and sentence, can be found at http://www.leagle.com/decision/1975111432IllApp3d1082_1927.

¹² Associated Press, “Man who hated feds gets 160 years for courthouse plot.”

¹³ Associated Press, “Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse.”

¹⁴ Associated Press, “Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse.”

¹⁵ Associated Press, “Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse.”

¹⁶ Napolitano, “Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot.”

¹⁷ Associated Press, “Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse.”

¹⁸ “Nettles gets life for court plot,” *chicagotribune.com*, January 13, 2006.

¹⁹ *United States of America v. Gale Nettles*, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

²⁰ *United States of America v. Gale Nettles*, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

²¹ From news services, “Nettles gets life for court plot.”

²² Napolitano, “Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot.”

4. Goals

Nettles told Beasley that he wanted to bring down the entire Dirksen Federal Building.²³ Assistant U.S. Attorney Brandon Fox stated that Nettles wanted to outdo Timothy McVeigh, and wanted to take down the entire building, impacting “several city blocks.”²⁴ The goal of the actual planned act of terrorism was thus relatively straightforward, and no alternate theories have been put forward to suggest that Nettles believed that his bombing would accomplish anything other than vengeance on the federal government. The goals of Nettles’ other crimes were all profit-based, such as his continued counterfeiting and his attempt to sell the leftover ammonium nitrate fertilizer to terrorist groups.

5. Plans for violence

Nettles’ plans for violence began during his time in the Federal Correctional Institute in Yazoo City, Mississippi. While serving a sentence there for a counterfeiting conviction, Nettles befriended Cecil Brown, a former rancher serving a sentence for racketing and fraud.²⁵ Initially, the two discussed plans to work together after their respective releases to launder Nettles’ counterfeit bills.²⁶ Eventually, however, Nettles began to ask Brown if Brown had ever worked with ammonium nitrate fertilizer on his farm, or had access to it.²⁷ Nettles told Brown of a plan he had to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building as retribution for his time spent in jail, and asked for contacts that could help him acquire ammonium nitrate after his release.

After acquiring what he believed to be the number of Brown’s nephew, Nettles contacted Gary Beasley, an FBI agent who posed as Brown’s nephew.²⁸ Nettles told Beasley of his plan to build a bomb with sufficient power to destroy the entire Dirksen Federal Building, and offered to finance it through counterfeiting.²⁹ Nettles purchased a ton of inert material that he believed to be ammonium nitrate from Beasley in exchange for counterfeit money.³⁰ Although Nettles never proved his capacity to build a bomb, U.S. Attorney Patrick J. Fitzgerald said in a statement that Nettles “had a rational plan a build a bomb. [The U.S. government] was not going to wait to see if it worked.”³¹

²³ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

²⁴ Associated Press, “Man who hated feds gets 160 years for courthouse plot.” Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, used a bomb similar to the one Nettles was attempting to construct to blow up the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995, killing 168 people. Understandably, many parallels are drawn between McVeigh and Nettles. McVeigh was sentenced to death in 2001.

²⁵ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

²⁶ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

²⁷ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007. Ammonium nitrate fertilizer is a high-nitrogen fertilizer that is highly explosive. It was used by Timothy McVeigh to construct the bomb used in the Oklahoma City bombings.

²⁸ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

²⁹ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³⁰ Associated Press, “Man who hated feds gets 160 years for courthouse plot.”

³¹ Associated Press, “Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse.”

Nettles also attempted to contact al-Qaeda to sell them excess ammonium nitrate.³² He reached out to other FBI informants who he believed to be criminal contacts, and asked to be put in touch with al-Qaeda representatives.³³ After being put in touch with an informant who was posing as an al-Qaeda member named Ali, Nettles again revealed the specifics of his plot and offered to sell Ali whatever amount of ammonium nitrate he would like.³⁴ Eventually, Nettles offered to sell a half-ton of ammonium nitrate to Ali for \$10,000.³⁵

6. Role of informants

The FBI played an extremely large role in the capture and conviction of Gale Nettles, keeping him under surveillance as soon as he was released from prison, but other informants played a role as well. The most important informant in this case is Cecil Brown, Nettles' fellow inmate. Brown initially reported Nettles to prison authorities, and had he not done so, it is difficult to discern if or when the FBI would have caught Nettles. Brown then continued to further cooperate with the FBI, passing along false information to Nettles.³⁶ Brown gave Nettles the number of another informant, Gary Beasley, who posed as Brown's nephew and as a farmer who had access to ammonium nitrate fertilizer.³⁷

Beasley became another important player in the saga. In January of 2004, Beasley travelled to Chicago to meet Nettles, and listened to Nettles outline his desire to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building.³⁸ Nettles asked Beasley if he was interested in purchasing counterfeit money, and in March 2004, Beasley sent Nettles a printer and computer so that Nettles was able to counterfeit.³⁹ This resonates as particularly important when Nettles' eventual sentence is taken into consideration: only two of his 20 year terms were for the actual plot to blow up the Dirksen Federal Building, while the other six were for his counterfeiting.⁴⁰ Beasley eventually supplied Nettles with what Nettles believed to be a ton of ammonium nitrate fertilizer in exchange for about \$9,000 worth of counterfeit bills.⁴¹ At this point, Nettles already had plans to resell the fertilizer to other informants.

Nettles was also in contact with other FBI informants, including Sylvia Anicua, who went by Maria, and introduced herself to Nettles in March 2004. Anicua told Nettles that she knew people who would be interested in purchasing his counterfeit money, and over the course of May, June, and July of 2004, Nettles made four deliveries of counterfeit money to Anicua, totaling \$52,200, in exchange for \$5,000 of real currency. In July of 2004, Nettles approached Anicua and asked her if she had any connections in al-Qaeda. She put him in touch with

³² Associated Press, "Man who hated feds gets 160 years for courthouse plot."

³³ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³⁴ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³⁵ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³⁶ Napolitano, "Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot."

³⁷ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³⁸ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

³⁹ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁴⁰ Associated Press, "Man who hated feds gets 160 years for courthouse plot."

⁴¹ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

yet another FBI informant, who went by Ali, and was posing as a member of al-Qaeda. On July 26, 2004, Nettles met with Anicua and Ali, and told Ali that he would sell a half-ton of ammonium nitrate fertilizer for \$10,000. Nettles also discussed his own plans with Ali, identifying the Dirksen Federal Building as his target, and drawing parallels between the Oklahoma City bombing and his own plot.⁴²

By this point, Nettles had told Beasley that he would want the ammonium nitrate fertilizer delivered to a storage unit in Chicago, and that he had been in contact with Hamas and al-Qaeda members who wanted to purchase any excess fertilizer. On August 4, 2004, Beasley picked Nettles up from his Chicago home in a truck containing what Nettles believed to be a ton of ammonium nitrate fertilizer. Beasley and Nettles unloaded 500 pounds of the fertilizer into a storage unit to which Nettles directed Beasley. Nettles then showed Beasley to a park where he was to leave the truck the next day, so that Nettles could sell the remaining ammonium nitrate fertilizer to Ali. The next day, August 5, 2004, Nettles and Anicua met Ali to exchange the fertilizer for \$10,000. Nettles was then arrested on counts of attempting to destroy a federal building by fire and explosive, attempting to destroy a building used in interstate commerce by fire and explosive, attempting to provide material support to terrorism, manufacturing counterfeit currency, and five counts of transferring counterfeit currency.⁴³

The proof for all of these charges was provided by FBI informants. Essentially Nettles' entire case was closely monitored by the FBI, and the constant interaction between Nettles and the informants allowed the FBI to build a strong case against him. The presence of the FBI informants may easily have prevented Nettles from ever making contact with al-Qaeda; although it is unlikely that a small-scale counterfeiter could have made contact with al-Qaeda, it is certainly not outside the realm of possibility. Had Nettles not been put in touch with Ali, he may have been able to carry out his plan. Without the informants, it is entirely possible that Nettles would have been able to see his plan to fruition.

Most of the informants in Nettles' case were operating because it was their job. Beasley, Anicua, and Ali were all on the FBI payroll. The exception to this is Brown, the inmate who originally learned of Nettles' plan. During trial, Nettles' attorney, John Theis, accused Brown of concocting the scheme to begin with, doing so for personal gain, to get his sentence reduced. Brown stated in court that he had not been informed of any personal gain from his role as an informant until September 2005. In September 2005, Brown was told that the U.S. Attorney in Louisiana would seek a 3.5 year reduction in his sentence as a reward for Brown's cooperation in the Nettles case.⁴⁴ Before this, Brown's motivation seems to have been nothing but wanting to prevent Nettles from causing death, though he may have also believed he would receive some other reward.

The degree of entrapment in this case is very low. At no point did the informants ever provide Nettles with anything other than what he requested from them. Brown supplied Nettles with contact information that Nettles had requested

⁴² United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁴³ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁴⁴ Matt O'Connor, "Trial under way in bombing plot," chicagotribune.com, September 8, 2005.

in order to obtain ammonium nitrate fertilizer. Beasley supplied Nettles with the fertilizer he asked for and also offered to buy counterfeit money once it was offered by Nettles. Although Anicua approached Nettles unsolicited, she did not request anything from him other than counterfeit money that he was already in the process of supplying to others. Nettles approached Anicua about al-Qaeda connections. Throughout, Nettles accelerated his plan and conceived new approaches to the attack of his own volition. He accused the FBI of entrapment, arguing that the FBI pushed Nettles into committing his crimes, but his arguments ultimately failed.⁴⁵

7. Connections

Nettles began his plot as a lone wolf, and never had formal connections with any terrorist group, foreign or domestic.⁴⁶ Over the course of his attempts to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building, he tried to make contact with al-Qaeda, and believed that he had made contact with al-Qaeda operatives.⁴⁷ However, he was not inspired by any al-Qaeda operations, nor did he take his cues from al-Qaeda as an organization or the supposed operatives with whom he was put in contact.

Nettles drew much of his inspiration from Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, who plotted to blow up the Oklahoma City Federal Building in 1995, but he had no formal connections to McVeigh. Nettles' motives were also different from McVeigh's; while McVeigh was sympathetic toward militias and opposed the federal government because of what he saw as tyranny, Nettles was motivated primarily out of self-interest.⁴⁸ Nettles also had no connections to anyone involved in the Oklahoma City bombing. His connection to McVeigh is derived only from the similarity of their plans, as Nettles modeled his attack on McVeigh's in the type of bomb used as well as the target.

8. Relations to the Muslim community

Nettles had no relationship to any Muslim community. Although he attempted to reach out to al-Qaeda, he did so for personal profit, stating himself that "as far as terrorism goes, I was after money, pure and simple."⁴⁹

9. Depiction by the authorities

The FBI points to Nettles' case as an important instance of homegrown terrorism, providing a summary of his plan and the use of informants to catch him.⁵⁰ The surveillance and arrest of Nettles was a major success. Throughout their discussion of Nettles, authorities were careful not to diminish the threat that he had posed. Although Nettles was never actually in contact with anyone who could have facilitated his plans to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building, U.S.

⁴⁵ O'Connor, "Trial under way in bombing plot."

⁴⁶ Napolitano, "Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot."

⁴⁷ United States of America v. Gale Nettles, 476 F.3d 508, February 12, 2007.

⁴⁸ Additional information about McVeigh can be found in footnote 24.

⁴⁹ "Nettles gets life for court plot."

⁵⁰ "Protecting America from Terrorist Attack: The Case of the Homegrown Terrorist," fbi.gov, August 2, 2006.

Attorney Fitzgerald used Nettles' case to highlight the continued threats that domestic and international terrorism posed to U.S. interests.⁵¹

The authorities faced a challenge in trying to make Nettles seem simultaneously like a real threat while also being far away from being able to see his plan through. While Nettles was never actually in contact with terrorists or in possession of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, he had a relatively well-formed plan, and, especially in the wake of the Oklahoma City bomber and September 11, this could have very much resonated with the American public. This necessitated that the government downplay the completeness of Nettles' plan. Many of their statements focused significantly more on the failings of Nettles, instead of his very real plans for violence.

10. Coverage by the media

Most of the articles covering Nettles' plan were written around the time of his arrest or around the time of his sentencing. Coverage was fairly sparse in between, possibly because there was very little news left to come out. The FBI had Nettles' story so completely figured out that, aside from his arrest and his sentence, there was no breaking news. All of the stories seemed to be relatively vague however, and they were not particularly numerous.

Because this case is almost ten years old (as of November 9, 2013), it seems possible that the low number of stories stems from a lack of updated archives on news sites. Another possibility, which seems more likely, is that the media did not feel the need to cover the story particularly in-depth because of the strength of the government's case. The case did not at any point seem complicated, and most of the media's coverage is from the perspective of the government.

The attorneys in the case are quoted in many stories, but almost none quote Nettles himself. In this way, the media coverage subtly aligned itself with the government, instead of covering the situation without bias. This could also be due to a lack of facts supporting any evidence other than the government's.⁵²

11. Policing costs

FBI involvement in the Nettles case was extremely high, leading to presumably high policing costs. Although Cecil Brown, the original informant, was not employed by the FBI, three separate informants were on the FBI payroll—Beasley, Anicua, and the informant known as Ali. Beasley was in contact with Nettles from October 2003 until Nettles' arrest in August 2004. Anicua was in contact with Nettles beginning in March 2004, and Ali was in contact with Ali beginning in July 2004. Combined, the FBI paid for 16 months' worth of information.

⁵¹ Napolitano, "Man Arrested in Chicago in Connection With Truck-Bomb Plot."

⁵² There was a lack of in-depth coverage of this case in the media; for this reason, I used the text of Nettles' appeal, found at <http://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F3/476/508/551263/>, extensively. Judge Martin provides an excellent summary of the case, and outlines the role of each of the informants clearly and concisely.

The pressure on the court system was relatively light, however. From arrest to conviction only took from 2004 to 2006. Nettles was then sentenced to 160 years, providing the court system with the burden of a life sentence.

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet did not play a significant role in this case. Most of Nettles' correspondence was in person, and there was nothing in the media coverage to suggest that Nettles used the internet for any research or correspondence.

13. Are we safer?

The FBI's handling of the case left the U.S. safer. Nettles had a definite plan to commit violence, a motivation, and might have eventually found the resources to do so. Because Nettles did not utilize the internet, catching him without the help of the informants could have been much more difficult. Using informants to build a case against him through their in-person interactions was an effective way of documenting Nettles' plan.

Had Nettles not been arrested, it seems likely that he would have gone through with his plan to bomb the Dirksen Federal Building. Few arguments of entrapment were made, and Nettles originally conceived his plan on his own, in prison. When he was explaining his plan to Brown, he already had ideas about where to park the bomb to create maximum damage.⁵³ His plan was fully developed; all the FBI supplied Nettles with initially was the ability to purchase what he believed to be ammonium nitrate fertilizer. As Nettles' plan got more intricate, he was again the driving force in reaching out to what he believed to be al-Qaeda and in continuing counterfeiting.

Nettles was not particularly intelligent or adept at committing crimes, but that is not a mitigating factor in this case.⁵⁴ Nettles might not have ever been able to obtain the fertilizer necessary for building such a bomb because he lacked the proper connections, and he might easily have given up or attracted the attention of the FBI in some other way. He would have almost certainly continued looking for some time for a supplier of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, however, but, had he found it, there is no evidence that his bomb would have worked.⁵⁵

Nettles displayed a willingness to partner with groups that have propagated and continue to propagate large-scale terrorist acts, such as al-Qaeda and Hamas. Nettles had no qualms about working with these groups, and when trying to defend himself on the stand, his only argument in defense of himself was that he had done so for profit, not for any genuine anti-American beliefs.⁵⁶ His support of terrorist groups for profit is just as terrifying as those who support terrorist groups out of their religious or political beliefs, and, had Nettles been successful, his nonchalant willingness to sell excess fertilizer to al-Qaeda would have potentially led to other terrorist acts in the future had he been able to find a terrorist buyer and had he actually been able to acquire fertilizer capable of being used in bombs.

⁵³ "Protecting America from Terrorist Attack: The Case of the Homegrown Terrorist."

⁵⁴ Associated Press, "Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse."

⁵⁵ Associated Press, "Arrest in Plot to Bomb Courthouse."

⁵⁶ From news services, "Nettles gets life for court plot."

America is safer not only because Gale Nettles failed to blow up the Dirksen Federal Building, but also because he did not, in fact, make contact with al-Qaeda. Nettles could have caused loss of life in several ways, and without the interference of the FBI, he might have succeeded, were he able to build a working bomb.

Even if he had never been able to find someone to sell him fertilizer or to put him in touch with al-Qaeda, Nettles could have easily adapted his plans to make them smaller scale while still violent. Having him kept away from the American public absolutely makes the general public safer.

14. Conclusions

The case of Gale Nettles is important not for any far-reaching implication on the American system, but because it provides an excellent case study of how the government and the media dealt with the idea of terrorism following September 11. Nettles ran counter to what the average American might have been expecting from a terrorist: he was old, white, an American citizen, lacking ties to any terrorist group, domestic or foreign, and not particularly intelligent or conniving. Although those prosecuting Nettles often stressed the idea that terrorists could be foreign or domestic, in 2004, very few Americans were thinking about domestic terrorism. Nettles served as a reminder that terrorists come in all shapes, sizes, nationalities, and creeds.

Even with that said, Nettles played into the idea of a terrorist by attempting to reach out to al-Qaeda. He did this simply because he knew who they were and believed they would buy his excess fertilizer, not because he agreed with their ideology. In this way, Nettles also provides a powerful reminder of why it is important to monitor potential threats. Nettles initially showed no inclination toward contacting or involving international terrorist groups, but did so when he saw a chance to profit. However, when he sought al-Qaeda contacts, he only found the FBI.

Lastly, Nettles provides an interesting case in light of many of the current controversies over the government's surveillance techniques. Nettles' case is one of the older ones in this collection of case studies, and the methods used to discover, observe, and eventually arrest him were different from 2013 methods. As the U.S. government uses more and more invasive methods in order to prevent terrorism, the techniques used in the Nettles case—prison informants, FBI agents meeting Nettles routinely in person in order to accumulate information, even a video camera in Ali's cab—are juxtaposed next to in-depth expanded surveillance techniques, such as tracking citizens' internet activity, which would not have helped in this case. Whether this case speaks to those who support expanded surveillance or those who oppose it is up for debate. Although the U.S. government did successfully monitor and arrest Nettles, much of their operation depended on luck. Without Cecil Brown originally reporting Nettles, it is difficult to know at what point in his plan he would have been discovered. This serves as a reminder that even today, with essentially unlimited resources at its disposal, the U.S. still must sometimes depend upon a racketeer in a Mississippi jail to do the right thing.