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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Noonday in the Shade

By PAUL KRUGMAN

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In April 2003, John Ashcroft's Justice Department disrupted what appears to have been a horrifying terrorist plot. In the small town of Noonday, Tex., F.B.I. agents discovered a weapons cache containing fully automatic machine guns, remote-controlled explosive devices disguised as briefcases, 60 pipe bombs and a chemical weapon — a cyanide bomb — big enough to kill everyone in a 30,000-square-foot building.

Strangely, though, the attorney general didn't call a press conference to announce the discovery of the weapons cache, or the arrest of William Krar, its owner. He didn't even issue a press release. This was, to say the least, out of character. Jose Padilla, the accused "dirty bomber," didn't have any bomb-making material or even a plausible way to acquire such material, yet Mr. Ashcroft put him on front pages around the world. Mr. Krar was caught with an actual chemical bomb, yet Mr. Ashcroft acted as if nothing had happened.

Incidentally, if Mr. Ashcroft's intention was to keep the case low-profile, the media have been highly cooperative. To this day, the Noonday conspiracy has received little national coverage.

At this point, I have the usual problem. Writing about John Ashcroft poses the same difficulties as writing about the Bush administration in general, only more so: the truth about his malfeasance is so extreme that it's hard to avoid sounding

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shrill.

In this case, it sounds over the top to accuse Mr. Ashcroft of trying to bury news about terrorists who don't fit his preferred story line. Yet it's hard to believe that William Krar wouldn't have become a household name if he had been a Muslim, or even a leftist. Was Mr. Ashcroft, who once gave an interview with *Southern Partisan* magazine in which he praised "Southern patriots" like Jefferson Davis, reluctant to publicize the case of a terrorist who happened to be a white supremacist?

More important, is Mr. Ashcroft neglecting real threats to the public because of his ideological biases?

Mr. Krar's arrest was the result not of a determined law enforcement effort against domestic terrorists, but of a fluke: when he sent a package containing counterfeit U.N. and Defense Intelligence Agency credentials to an associate in New Jersey, it was delivered to the wrong address. Luckily, the recipient opened the package and contacted the F.B.I. But for that fluke, we might well have found ourselves facing another Oklahoma City-type atrocity.

The discovery of the Texas cyanide bomb should have served as a wake-up call: 9/11 has focused our attention on the threat from Islamic radicals, but murderous right-wing fanatics are still out there. The concerns of the Justice Department, however, appear to lie elsewhere. Two weeks ago a representative of the F.B.I. appealed to an industry group for help in combating what, he told the audience, the F.B.I. regards as the country's leading domestic terrorist threat: ecological and animal rights extremists.

Even in the fight against foreign terrorists, Mr. Ashcroft's political leanings have distorted policy. Mr. Ashcroft is very close to the gun lobby — and these ties evidently trump public protection. After 9/11, he ordered that all government lists — including voter registration, immigration and driver's license lists — be checked for links to terrorists. All government lists, that is, except one: he specifically prohibited the F.B.I. from examining background checks on gun purchasers.

Mr. Ashcroft told Congress that the law prohibits the use of those background checks for other purposes — but he didn't tell Congress that his own staff had concluded that no such prohibition exists. Mr. Ashcroft issued a directive, later put into law, requiring that records of background checks on gun buyers be destroyed after only one business day.

And we needn't imagine that Mr. Ashcroft was deeply concerned about protecting the public's privacy. After all, a few months ago he took the

unprecedented step of subpoenaing the hospital records of women who have had late-term abortions.

After my last piece on Mr. Ashcroft, some readers questioned whether he is really the worst attorney general ever. It's true that he has some stiff competition from the likes of John Mitchell, who served under Richard Nixon. But once the full record of his misdeeds in office is revealed, I think Mr. Ashcroft will stand head and shoulders below the rest.

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