

Bicycle bombs: a further enquiry and a new theory

Has anyone, anywhere, ever, been killed by a pipe bomb disguised as a bicycle? I have been pursuing this question since last June with the help of the Internet and the BBC's Today Programme and World Service. So far the answer appears to be "not yet"; but it remains in the mind of the Westminster Police a theoretical possibility that must be zealously guarded against. (New readers can catch up here: <http://john-adams.co.uk/2008/11/05/proving-a-negative-and-the-onus-of-proof/>)

The manner of the guarding is causing great inconvenience to significant numbers of cyclists. Around Parliament Square and Whitehall, and other areas that the police deem particularly sensitive to threats of terrorism, the police are confiscating bicycles on the grounds that they might be pipe bombs. A problem for cyclists is that the boundaries of these areas are not published. Cyclists are left to guess where it is safe to park their bicycles.

A further complication recently called to my attention is that the ban on cycle parking in some areas is episodic – around the Albert Hall, I am told, it only applies during times when Very Important Personages are attending events; but again the poor cyclist is left to guess - who counts as a VIP, and when they might be in attendance, and how far away is it safe to park one's bicycle to avoid having it nicked by the police?

On the 5th of November Lord Colwyn made a noble attempt to shed some light on this problem. His effort, recorded by Hansard:

Lord Colwyn (5 November 2008) asked Her Majesty's Government:

What area is covered by the cycle parking exclusion zone around the Palace of Westminster (excluding buildings owned by the Parliamentary Estate); and [HL6163]

What is their assessment of the risk posed by cycle bombs in the vicinity of the Palace of Westminster; and whether they are aware of any fatalities or serious injuries caused by cycle bombs in the United Kingdom or elsewhere. [HL6164]

On 26 November 2008 Lord Colwyn received this reply from Lord West of Spithead (Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Security and Counter-terrorism, Home Office):

It has not proved possible to respond to the noble Lord in the time available before Prorogation.

Lord Colwyn persisted, re-tableting his questions on 8 December. Finally, on 12 January he was vouchsafed an answer:

The cycle parking exclusion zone around the Palace of Westminster is a matter for Westminster City Council.

and

We are aware of 31 reported incidents, five of which have occurred within the United Kingdom, involving the use of improvised explosive devices disguised as or hidden upon bicycles that have taken place between August 1939 and June 2008. The highest reported number of fatalities resulting from one bicycle improvised explosive device is 22. The most recent incidents involving a bicycle bomb in the UK were on 13 August 1994 in Brighton and Bognor Regis. The incident in 2008 was in Pakistan and resulted in five deaths.

The first answer can only be considered deliberately unhelpful. That the Government Minister responsible for security and counter-terrorism could not easily have found the information requested is not plausible.

The second answer is partial, containing no assessment of the risk, and also disingenuous. The reference to “explosive devices **disguised as** or hidden upon bicycles” glosses over a crucial distinction. Bicycles have been used to transport bombs, as have motorcycles, cars, vans, trucks, and pedestrians with backpacks. But Westminster Police are confiscating naked bicycles on the grounds that they could be pipe bombs in disguise. Thus far I have failed to find a single confirmed case of such a bomb killing anyone anywhere.

Lord West, again unhelpfully, does not provide the list of incidents to which he refers, but it appears similar to the one that provoked my inquiry last June (<http://john-adams.co.uk/2008/07/28/bicycle-bombs-a-threat-to-westminster/>). Both begin in Coventry in 1939 and end in Pakistan in 2008, and both include Brighton and Bognor Regis. Our lists, however, are not identical; my list contains 33 incidents and his 31, and my list contains 6 UK incidents and his 5. If his list contains any confirmed cases of bicycles deployed as pipe bombs causing death or injury I suspect he would have included them in his answer.

“We had to hang the bicycle”: an Irish theory

There has been in recent years a growing enthusiasm for hard-headed evidence-based decision making – evidence-based medicine, evidenced-based policy, evidence-based regulation, evidence-based government. What is the *evidence* that a particular decision, policy or edict will achieve its intended objective? What is the *evidence* that banning the parking of bicycles will make anyone safer? So far evidence in support of the police view that bicycles pose a security threat to the political heart of London has yet to be produced. But, pending evidence, we have theory.

“We had to hang the bicycle”. It came to me in the middle of an insomniac night. A strange novel I had read some decades ago. *The Third Policeman* by Flan O’Brien.

O’Brien’s novel published over forty years ago anticipated the problem currently being confronted by the Metropolitan Police who are arresting bicycles parked anywhere they might pose a security threat.

The three policemen in O'Brien's story are all paranoid and obsessed with bicycles. And they are in the grip of the Atomic Theory, alternatively referred to as the Mollycule Theory, explained thus:

Everything is composed of small particles of itself and they are flying around in concentric circles and arcs and segments and innumerable other geometrical figures too numerous to mention collectively, never standing still or resting but spinning away and darting hither and thither and back again, all the time on the go. These diminutive figures are called atoms.

The theory is applied:

People who spend most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of the parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycles as a result of the interchanging of mollycules of each of them.

With capital consequences:

The last hanging we had in this parish was thirty years ago. It was a very famous man call MacDadd. He held the record for the one hundred miles on a solid tyre. I need to tell you what the solid tyre did for him. We had to hang the bicycle.

The policeman explained that through the exchange of mollycules the bicycle had become more than fifty percent MacDadd:

We had to arrest his bicycle as well as himself and we watched the two of them under secret observation for a week to seek where the majority of MacDadd was and whether the bicycle was mostly in MacDadd's trousers.

The Mollycule Theory is portable. The roadsteads in the countries from which most suicide bombers come are potholed and rocky. Through the exchange of mollycules their bicycles could become suicide bombers.

It's a theory.

Perhaps the best one currently available to account for the paranoid anti-cyclist policy of the police in Westminster.

PS The Third Policeman is still in print and available from Amazon – http://www.amazon.co.uk/Policeman-Harper-Perennial-Modern-Classics/dp/0007247176/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1232035104&sr=1-1

If you liked *Alice in Wonderland* you will love *The Third Policeman*.