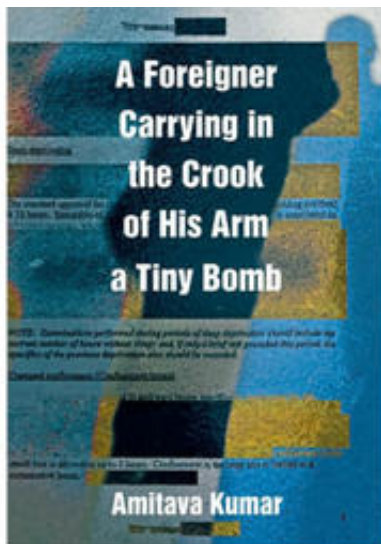


# A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb

Has post-9/11 fear created a not-so-brave new world of bullies and fools?



A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb by Amitava Kumar Duke University Press 217 pp., \$21.95

By Terry Hong

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If Rip Van Winkle were to read **A Foreigner Carrying in the Crook of His Arm a Tiny Bomb** upon waking, he would most likely shake his head and dismiss it as farce.

Alas, you'll only find this title in the "non-fiction" section of bookstores and libraries; it's published by an esteemed academic press and written by a respected professor of English at an elite American college. Indeed, "truth is stranger than fiction," and "you just can't make this stuff up." (Although, coincidentally, journalist/novelist/poet/professor Amitava Kumar also had a novel – "Nobody Does the Right Thing" – published on the same day as "Foreigner.")

Novel aside, "Foreigner" is part contemporary history, part investigative journalism, part political treatise, part memoir – and an absolute must-read. My greatest fear is that the readers who most need to read this book will not.

Kumar is an excellent storyteller. He's also immensely convincing. Drawing on his vast, voracious knowledge of literature, film, television, and breaking headlines, Kumar makes a case that post-9/11 fear has created a not-so-brave new world of bullies and fools.

Moving fluidly between his adopted US home and his birthplace of India – another country altered by concerns over terrorism – Kumar carefully exposes what he sees as the senseless abuse of power justified by the "war on terror": "[M]uch of my reportage here is in the service of presenting the anti-terrorism state as the biggest bungler," Kumar writes in his acknowledgements as he thanks "the non-experts," "the losers," and "the small people."

Kumar first focuses on two ineffectual men, each of whom he classifies as an "accidental terrorist." He demonstrates in rich detail the ways in which both men were victims of legal entrapment, more guilty of stupidity than actual terrorism, manipulated into crime by others who were mostly concerned with saving themselves in the eyes of an already nervous US government.

The first "accidental terrorist" is Hemant Lakhani, a nearly-70-year-old failed businessman with delusions of grandeur, who was convicted of trying to sell a missile to a would-be terrorist. The missile was a dud, shipped to a New Jersey hotel room by the FBI, and brokered by a "terrorist" who proved to be FBI informant Habib Rehman. Rehman – also a failed businessman –

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had considerable debts, a self-confessed track record as a liar, and a history of tax evasion. His handsome salary was funded by US taxpayers.

The second terrorist manqué is Shawahar Matin Siraj, a 24-year-old Pakistani American, convicted of conspiring to bomb a NYC subway station. Kumar wryly questions the validity of “prosecut[ing] an individual as a bomber when there is no bomb on the scene.” The lead witness against the unsophisticated Siraj – who is caught on tape insisting on “No killing” and wants to “ask [his] mother’s permission” – was Osama Eldawoody, an Egyptian-born nuclear engineer. Eldawoody was paid \$100,000 by the New York Police Department to spy on fellow mosque-goers in Brooklyn and Staten Island. He became an informant via the FBI who literally arrived at his front door because a neighbor reported “suspicious-looking packages on the doorway” (clothing purchased online). The unemployed Eldawoody just “wanted to help.”

Over and again, Kumar attempts to demonstrate that, as a character in Sir David Hare’s play “Stuff Happens” proclaims: “On September 11, America changed. Yes. It got much stupider.” Hasan Elahi, a California artist and teacher who was detained for questioning and endured a six-month FBI investigation, now uploads a constant stream of location-tracked, time-stamped photographs on his website TrackingTransience.net, in effect creating an irrefutable alibi for himself should he be picked up again.

Graduate student Mohamed Yousry, the court-appointed interpreter in the controversial conviction of blind Egyptian cleric Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, is serving his one-year-and-eight-months-sentence for having provided “material support” to terrorists by translating Sheikh Omar’s Arabic words into English for defense attorney Lynne Stewart.

Art professor Steve Kurtz was illegally detained by the FBI on his way to the funeral home to bury his wife and investigated for bioterrorism stemming from a \$256 purchase of harmless, legally-purchased bacteria for an art installation, “... and even his wife’s body [was] seized.”

Again and again, Kumar makes a case that the “red zone of a terrorist threat” has blinded post-9/11 courts to blatant injustice, condemnation without evidence, and even torture: “[T]his new definition of public interest, where the argument is made in terms of national security,” writes Kumar, “will trump all other claims every time.”

That national security threat at home, Kumar argues, keeps citizens distracted from the “greater horror of the other war [in Iraq] from our eyes.” We fail to see “[the] crying girl in front of us ... her dead parents, [her] father’s skull collapsed because he has been shot so many times.”

For Kumar, our failure to fully process such scenes becomes a “lesson in cultural awareness” : for the Iraqi family, the carnage is murder; for the US military, stopping the unfamiliar vehicle is potential self-preservation.

Kumar sums up: “the larger point is that the war on terror is obscuring from our sight the war in Iraq and its human cost.” Then he asks the most important question of all: “In the end ... who will teach the other to be human?”

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