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Bishop's scheme wasn't well thought out



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Perhaps John Tomkins was just another workaday guy trying to make a killing in the stock market. Few who knew the Dubuque, Iowa, machinist can believe the creepy letters and the mail bombs he allegedly used to threaten corporate executives and money managers, including a bomb that went to Janus Funds in Denver.

Don Stedman, who lives four doors down from Tomkins, told me he bought Girl Scout cookies from Tomkins' daughters. Stedman said he had often seen Tomkins running his bench saw in the driveway, working hard on home-remodeling projects. He'd also seen Tomkins playing basketball with his three girls and taking walks with his wife, Julie. "They kind of seemed like Ward and June Cleaver," Stedman told me. "They were just a fantastic family."

Tomkins is the father of elementary- and junior-high-school-age daughters and allegedly is "The Bishop," too. In this dark alter ego, Tomkins allegedly threatened executives with the loss of their own children if they didn't drive up the value of investments he held. "Kids are snatched all the time," Tomkins wrote, according to a federal criminal complaint. "And the poor parents are tormented for years not knowing what happened to their angel. Do you really want to be responsible for that?"

The Bishop made references to Una

bomber Ted Kaczynski and Beltway sniper Lee Boyd Malvo. He also mailed functional but deactivated pipe bombs with the message "BANG!! YOU'RE DEAD."

Tomkins has been unreachable since his arrest Wednesday. His public defender, Rose Lindsay, did not return my messages Thursday.

Tomkins' hometown newspaper, the Telegraph Herald, is replete with quotes from friends and neighbors.

"He was just super cool," neighbor Ken Hoffman said.

"He was always a nice boy," Irene Herbst told the local NBC affiliate.

Tomkins was a machinist at the Adams Co., a custom manufacturer of gears, sprockets and shafts. He was treasurer of the local machinists union. He also was a "respected" member of Resurrection Catholic Church, according to the Telegraph Herald. And his wife's family reportedly owns a local car dealership.

Fred Burton has been profiling the Bishop since his letters first appeared on executives' desks in 2005, representing clients who received the letters. Burton is the vice president for counterterrorism and corporate security for an Austin, Texas-based consulting firm called Stratfor.

"We had some very frightened people receive these very alarming communications, which in this day and age you have to take seriously," Burton said.

Burton predicted the suspect would be a functioning member of society because the letters seemed well-written, but they also became more disturbing over time.

"An individual like this is clearly suffering some degree of mental illness," he said. "And he was naive to misunderstand how much

data is captured today."

Tomkins was arrested because he was the only investor who had options positions in the two companies mentioned.

Clearly, Tomkins did not work on Wall Street. If he had, he'd also know that stock manipulation is a game played with pens, not pipe bombs. Start a newsletter, create a website, hire a PR firm, open a phone bank in a boiler room, bribe a broker, post bald-faced lies on a message board or blast fake e-mail press releases - but don't put a bomb in the mail. That will only provoke an army of postal inspectors and FBI agents.

Most people involved in financial schemes do not need weapons. "I've never had a crackpot do anything that borders on both financial fraud and violence," said Kevin Knierim, a former FBI agent turned independent consultant.

But given the anger people have about corporate malfeasance, Burton worries about copycats. One letter the Bishop wrote complained about an executive's compensation amid a decline in stock value. "You owe it to us to make things right or I will make your life as miserable as mine," the letter said. Anthony Accetta, a Denver fraud investigator, says the Bishop's act won't likely be repeated. It's too amateurish. "He's just a postal maniac who transferred to the financial world," Accetta said.

Al Lewis' column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Respond to him at denverpostbloghouse.com/lewis, 303-954-1967 or alewis@denverpost.com.