



HISTORY STORIES



Many countries classify powerful opioids like carfentanil as chemical weapons.

In October 2002, after Chechen rebels [stormed a Moscow theater](#) and trapped more than 800 people for 57 hours, it seemed like it couldn't get much worse. Then Russian troops released a mysterious gas into the theater. The gas was intended to incapacitate the rebels—which it did—but it also ended up killing more than 120 of the hostages.

That gas contained [carfentanil](#), an opioid 10,000 times more powerful than morphine and 100 times more powerful than fentanyl. Fentanyl has received increased media attention in recent years because of the U.S. opioid crisis, but carfentanil has also been seeping into the American drug market and causing overdose deaths. So yes, carfentanil is a drug that Americans are overdosing on—and it's also a weapon banned by the [Chemical Weapons Convention](#).

As the then-unknown gas filled the theater, hostages and rebels alike passed out or died immediately. Russian officers dragged everyone out and packed both living and dead hostages onto the same buses and cars, says [David Satter](#), a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and author of [*The Less You Know, the Better You Sleep: Russia's Road to Terror and Dictatorship under Yeltsin and Putin*](#).

"Bodies were piled one on top of another outside the theater entrance, with no attempt to separate the living from the dead," [Satter writes](#) in his book. "Alexander Karpov, a well-known songwriter, died after spending seven hours alive in a bus packed with corpses. In another case, thirty hostages were put in a twelve-seat military microbus, some on the floor. A thirteen-year-old girl was crushed under the bodies and died on the way to a hospital."

Because Russian officials refused to reveal what was in the gas they'd released, medical professionals didn't know how to treat the hundreds of victims. They spent several hours testing antidotes before finding that naloxone, a drug used to treat opioid overdoses, could help counter the effects of the gas. By then, more lives had been lost, and the survivors' health had worsened. Those who lived through the experience continued to suffer from problems that no one knew how to treat, because the gas that'd caused them was still a mystery.

Russia's rationale for using the gas in the crisis was that officers couldn't have safely evacuated the hostages unless the rebels were incapacitated. This was because the rebels had announced they'd strung up bombs and some of them were wearing suicide belts. Later, officials discovered that the bombs were dummies, and that most of the suicide belts were fake. In any case, officers "shot all of the terrorists, including those who were unconscious, so that nobody was in a position to dispute their version of events," Satter says.

Nearly 16 years later, Russia still hasn't admitted what was in the gas, and has only [acknowledged](#) that it contained fentanyl-related compounds. But in 2012, a group of British scientists [analyzed](#) clothing from two survivors and urine from a third survivor. They determined that the gas contained the extremely potent drug carfentanil.

Out of the more than [64,000 drug overdose deaths](#) in 2016, over 20,000 were related to fentanyl (which is already 50 times more powerful than heroin) and fentanyl analogs. That year, the Drug Enforcement Administration announced in [a press release](#) that first responders were starting to see overdoses from carfentanil, which is a fentanyl analog. Recently, federal investigators found enough carfentanil [to kill 86,000 people](#) in the home of one San Diego dealer.

A 2016 [AP investigation](#) found that carfentanil is easily available from Chinese dealers, who continue to ship it to the U.S. despite recent collaboration between the countries to limit its export and production. This not only makes it easier for people with opioid addictions to obtain lethal doses, it also makes it easier for terrorists and authoritarian governments to obtain drugs that many countries recognize as chemical weapons. In a 2017 article for the The Cipher Brief, former CIA acting director Michael J. Morell argued that the opioid crisis is a national security threat that we're not paying attention to.

"[C]arfentanil is the perfect terrorist weapon," [he wrote](#). "It is readily available in large quantities. It comes in several forms—including tablets, powder, and spray. It can be absorbed through the skin or through inhalation. It acts quickly ... In short, a single terrorist attack using carfentanil could kill thousands of Americans."

Despite this, “No one from either the Obama or Trump administrations has spoken publicly about the threat,” Morell continued. “It would be a terrible tragedy if foreign terrorists were to use the consequences of our own domestic drug problem against us—particularly when it is so easy to see what might be coming.”

FACT CHECK: *We strive for accuracy and fairness. But if you see something that doesn't look right, [click here](#) to contact us! HISTORY reviews and updates its content regularly to ensure it is complete and accurate.*

RELATED CONTENT