

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

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By David Maraniss; Walter Pincus

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Federal investigators have been credited for moving with notable speed and success so far in their effort to find the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing. They also have benefited from a measure of luck. But the full story behind the bloodiest terrorist act in American history remains largely a mystery.

Federal agents are pursuing thousands of leads as they seek to resolve the unanswered questions:

Who was the mastermind? How many people were involved? What role did Timothy James McVeigh, the only suspect arrested so far, really play in the matter? Were the Nichols brothers uninvolved, on the periphery or near the center of the plot? When and where was the bombing scheme planned? What was the motivation? This chronology presents a context in which to consider those questions: the known facts about McVeigh and his activities, around which the case so far has been framed. It is drawn from dozens of interviews and federal affidavits.

PART 1: LIVES AND TIMES APRIL 23, 1968, EARLY HISTORY: Timothy James McVeigh is born in Pendleton, N.Y., a suburb north of Buffalo. His father works at a General Motors parts plant. When McVeigh is 10, his mother leaves the family and moves to Florida, taking one daughter with her. Tim, his father and the other sister move to a small beige bungalow in Pendleton. Friends and neighbors say he becomes withdrawn. McVeigh is interested in cars, computers and athletics in high school. With a satiric touch, his classmates vote him "Most Talkative." He graduates from Starpoint High in 1986 and hangs around Buffalo for a few years, working for a time as a security guard near the airport. Co-workers notice that he becomes argumentative and say he exhibits a "short fuse."

MAY 24, 1988. MILITARY CONNECTION: McVeigh and Terry Lynn Nichols join the Army on the same day: McVeigh in Buffalo, Nichols in Detroit. They go through 13-week infantry training at Fort Benning, Ga. Both are stationed at Fort Riley, Kan., and assigned to Charlie Company, 2/16th Infantry Battalion, 1st Infantry Division. Nichols receives a hardship discharge for undisclosed family reasons on May 15, 1989. McVeigh tries to join a Special Forces unit but is injured and unable to make the grade. He becomes a Bradley Fighting Vehicle infantryman and serves in Operation Desert Storm, where he earns a Bronze Star medal and the rank of sergeant. The war seems to transform McVeigh, several acquaintances tell federal agents later. He returns to Fort Riley, gets a Kansas driver's license and takes an interest in off-base activities involving gun shows and anti-government paramilitary groups. One acquaintance later says McVeigh tells him that the Army planted a computer chip in his buttocks. He is discharged on Dec. 31, 1991.

FEBRUARY 11, 1992. EMERGING IDEOLOGY: McVeigh, living back at home and serving in the New York National Guard, writes to his hometown newspaper, the Lockport, N.Y., Union-Sun & Journal. It appears

in The Mailbag section under the headline: "America Faces Problems." The letter attacks the criminal justice system, higher taxes and corrupt politicians. It talks of the collapse of communism and a belief that democracy "seems to be headed down the same road." The final paragraph says America "is in serious decline. We have no proverbial tea to dump. Should we instead sink a ship full of Japanese imports? Is a civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might." The letter is signed: Tim McVeigh. 6289 Campbell Boulevard. Town of Lockport. SUMMER 1992. BOYS ON THE FARM: McVeigh makes his first extended visit to the 500-acre farm eight miles north of Decker in northeast Michigan operated by Terry Lynn Nichols, his Army friend, and Nichols's older brother James. The Nichols brothers, both divorced, are well known in the area for their right-wing anti-government views. James marks U.S. currency with a red stamp saying he is not responsible for backing up its value. Terry writes of himself in a court suit involving his failure to pay credit card bills that he is "no longer one of your citizens of your de facto government. He is nonresident alien, nonforeigner. Stranger." While visiting the Nichols brothers, McVeigh joins them in making bottle bombs, using brake fluid, gasoline and diesel fuel. One neighbor describes them as acting like boys at play. APRIL 19, 1993. WACO RALLYING CRY: After a 51-day siege at a compound near Waco, Tex., Branch Davidian fortress becomes engulfed in flames during an assault by federal agents. During the standoff, and even more so after the conflagration in which David Koresh and 79 of his followers die, Waco emerges as a rallying cry for right-wing anti-government militia organizations that oppose federal gun laws, detest Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents, and espouse a theory that Waco and other events are early signs of a federal conspiracy to impose a new world order. McVeigh visits the Waco site at least once and returns expressing "extreme anger" about federal agents. He talks about it incessantly and carries around literature on the subject. The primary FBI spokesman at the Waco standoff is from the Oklahoma City Field Office. JUNE 1993. ARIZONA DAYS: McVeigh moves to Kingman, a western Arizona city along Route 66 on the edge of the Mojave Desert. He is drawn there by former comrades from Fort Riley, including Michael Fortier, affiliated with the western militia known as the Arizona Patriots. Kingman is a free-wheeling town where men can be seen carrying pistols in shoulder holsters. From June to September 1993, McVeigh lives at trailer 11 at Canyon West trailer park. Fortier gets him a job at a True Value hardware store where he works for a few months. He handles lumber out back, wearing Army camouflage fatigues to work every day. Co-workers are struck by McVeigh's intense anti-government views and strong feelings about Waco. Gun magazines and Waco-related literature are sent to his mail drop on Stockton Hill Road. FALL 1993. BACK IN MICHIGAN: McVeigh returns to the Nichols farm. He surrenders the Kansas driver's license he had since his Fort Riley days and gets a Michigan license, listing the Nichols farm as his home address. He works as a farmhand and travels to gun shows selling arms. He brags about his role in Desert Storm, claiming he shot an Iraqi from a thousand feet away and others surrendered to him. Decker farm neighbors describe him as troubled. Using his favorite alias, Terry Tuttle, McVeigh visits a hobby shop and inquires about buying 100 percent liquid nitro model airplane fuel, used in the manufacture of explosives. More small bombs go off on the Nichols farm. On Nov. 22, Terry Nichols's 2-year-old son suffocates with a plastic bag over his head. Police rule it accidental. McVeigh continues roaming between Michigan, Kansas and

Arizona. MAY 1994. CENTERING IN KANSAS: Terry Nichols moves to a ranch in Marion, Kan., with his second wife. He is described by the owner as a good employee who constantly grouses about taxes and government. He sometimes mentions his friend Tim. McVeigh visits him in early October: Nichols quits as a ranch hand and says he is going to Arizona to sell guns. McVeigh is there to help him move. Nichols does not end up in Arizona, however, but moves in the middle of the night to a three-bedroom house in Herington, 30 miles away.

NOVEMBER 1994. BOMB PRACTICE IN DECKER: James Nichols makes more small explosive devices on the farm using prescription vials, black powder, blasting caps and safety fuses. Terry Nichols and Tim McVeigh are again occasionally seen visiting the farm. They boast to a neighbor that they are getting good at bomb making. The three men take an interest in the Michigan Militia, a paramilitary civilian organization. Two of them are seen at a meeting of the militia in Jackson, Mich., in January 1995. On Jan. 19, 1995, James Nichols transfers the title of his car, a 1983 blue Pontiac station wagon, to McVeigh, who registers the car in Kingman, Ariz.

MARCH 1995. TROUBLE PREDICTED: Leaders of the Michigan Militia and others in the anti-government patriot movement around the country spread word through their network that federal agents are being trained in West Texas for a nationwide raid on paramilitary units late in the month. They say it is part of a plot to disarm civilians and destroy the militia movement. There is also increasing talk of revenge or protest action to mark the second anniversary of the Waco confrontation.

PART II: TWENTY-ONE DAYS FRIDAY, MARCH 31, LYING LOW: McVeigh is in Arizona. He checks into the Imperial Motel in Kingman and pays in advance for 12 days. The motel manager says it appears McVeigh stays by himself and receives no phone calls. He checks out at 10 a.m. on April 12.

FRIDAY, APRIL 14, FIVE DAYS BEFORE: McVeigh is in Junction City, Kan., near Fort Riley, about 1,000 miles from Kingman. The Pontiac station wagon he got from James Nichols breaks down, so he trades it in and pays \$250 for a yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis from the local Firestone tire dealer. He transfers the Arizona plates to the Mercury. Later in the day, he checks into the Dreamland Motel. He registers in his own name and lists his car as the Mercury with Arizona plates. He provides his address as the Nichols home in Michigan. He pays \$20 a night plus tax and stays in Room 25, near the office.

SATURDAY, APRIL 15, FOUR DAYS BEFORE: There are no reports of what McVeigh did during the day. That night, someone from Room 25 at the Dreamland orders moo goo gai pan and egg rolls from the Hunan Palace restaurant. The deliveryman, Jeff Davis, says the food was called in under the name Bob Kling. McVeigh's assistant on his Bradley Fighting Vehicle team at Fort Riley had the last name Kling: it would become another McVeigh alias. But according to the deliveryman, the person who answers the motel room door that evening does not look like McVeigh, nor does he fit a description of a McVeigh accomplice drawn later by authorities. He has longer hair and a fuller face.

SUNDAY, APRIL 16, THREE DAYS BEFORE: At 3 p.m. McVeigh calls Terry Nichols at his house in Herington. He tells Nichols that he is in Oklahoma City -- it is unclear when McVeigh arrived in Oklahoma City and how he got there -- and asks Nichols to drive down, pick him up, and take him back to his motel in Junction City, a 550-mile round trip. Nichols agrees to McVeigh's request. On the drive back north to Kansas, Nichols later tells federal agents, McVeigh says "something big is going to happen." Nichols asks McVeigh whether that means he is going to rob a bank, to which McVeigh merely repeats, "Something big is going to happen."

MONDAY, APRIL 17, TWO DAYS BEFORE: Nichols and McVeigh arrive

back in Junction City at 1:30 a.m. Nichols drops off McVeigh at the Dreamland and drives home to Herington. Late that afternoon, a man fitting McVeigh's description, and another man, who would later be labeled by authorities as John Doe No. 2, appear at Elliott's Body Shop on Golden Belt Boulevard in Junction City. The man looking like McVeigh does all the talking. He says they want to rent a Ryder truck and need one with a 5,000-pound payload. They rent the truck in the name of Robert D. Kling, using the same alias with which the Chinese food had been ordered at the Dreamland. They provide a bogus South Dakota driver's license with Kling's name and an address in Nebraska: 428 Maple Drive, Omaha. The date of birth on the false license echoes the fateful date of Waco -- April 19 -- but the year 1970. The Dreamland manager later sees the truck in the motel parking lot, as far away as possible from Room 25. McVeigh is asked to move it because it is too near a ditch. At 8 that night, at the Great Western Inn a mile up the road, a man who fits the description of John Doe No. 2 -- square-jawed, brown-haired, with a tattoo on his arm and a cap with two stripes on it -- checks in for one night.

TUESDAY, APRIL 18, ONE DAY BEFORE: McVeigh is seen by the manager in the Dreamland parking lot at 4 a.m., sitting in the Ryder truck with the light on, appearing to be studying something, perhaps a map. He is gone by the time the manager makes coffee an hour later. At 6 a.m., from an unknown location, McVeigh calls Terry Nichols in Herington and seeks another favor: He wants Nichols to drive to Junction City and let him use Nichols's pickup truck. Nichols arrives at 7:30. According to what Nichols later tells federal agents, McVeigh then drives off in the pickup truck. He returns more than six hours later, at around 2 that afternoon. McVeigh and Nichols drive to a storage shed. Nichols later told federal agents McVeigh said to him: "If I don't come back in a while, you clean out the shed."

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, THE DAY THE BOMB HIT: Three witnesses see someone they later identify as Tim McVeigh standing in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City between 8:40 and 8:55 that morning. A meter maid sees a Ryder truck driving toward the federal building. A nearby surveillance camera later shows a Ryder truck driving down a street heading toward the federal building at around the same time. Another witness sees McVeigh sitting in a parked car, the yellow Mercury Marquis, near the building, and then speeding away. One witness remembers seeing two men in the car. The building is bustling that morning with federal workers, citizens there to conduct business and children attending a day-care center, as many as 800 people in all. At 9:02, a bomb weighing 4,800 pounds explodes, devastating the nine-story building. Just blocks away is the on-ramp to Interstate 40, which quickly leads to the main highway north, Interstate 35. At 10:30 a.m., state trooper Charles D. Hanger sees a 1977 yellow Mercury Marquis driving up I-35 near Perry, about 63 miles north of Oklahoma City. The car is missing a license plate. Hanger stops the car, driven by Tim McVeigh. As McVeigh gets out of the car, Hanger notices a bulge in his jacket. He makes him stand against the car with his arms spread and finds a Glock semiautomatic .45 pistol loaded with black talon ammunition known as "cop killer" bullets. McVeigh explains that he is a security guard and that he is on a cross-country trip. It is illegal in Oklahoma to carry concealed weapons and loaded weapons. Hanger leaves the Mercury on the side of the highway and takes McVeigh to the courthouse in Perry. McVeigh's driver's license is from Michigan and his address is the Nichols house. He is arrested on weapons and traffic charges. He lists James Nichols as his next of kin. From the Noble County Courthouse, McVeigh makes three telephone calls, one in

search of a lawyer. In jail he has three cellmates. That night, investigators find part of a mangled truck axle two blocks from the bomb site. It has an ID number that is traced to a Ryder truck rented from Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City. THURSDAY, APRIL 20: Investigators flood the Junction City area and find witnesses who describe the men who rented the truck from Elliott's and who stayed in motels. They develop composite sketches of possible suspects, calling them John Doe No. 1 and John Doe No. 2. The first has a crew cut and looks much like McVeigh. The second has a tattoo. The probe reveals that Robert Kling is an alias. McVeigh is booked on weapons and traffic charges in Perry. His bond hearing is put off for a day because the judge has a divorce proceeding. McVeigh could be released on \$5,000 bond, but instead is kept overnight again. FRIDAY, APRIL 21: Federal investigators get McVeigh's name from records at the Dreamland Motel. A former McVeigh co-worker sees the composite sketch and recognizes it as resembling McVeigh, whom he describes as an anti-government zealot who once visited the Waco site and came back fuming. Agents check computers and realize Tim McVeigh is being held on other charges in Perry. McVeigh is targeted as a key suspect in the bombing. His bond hearing, scheduled for 9:30 that morning, is delayed an hour. The FBI asks authorities in Perry to hold him until they arrive. Before the bond hearing McVeigh says he is a drifter with no permanent address but lists his mailing address as the Nichols residence in Michigan. His bond is set at \$5,000. McVeigh, unaware that the FBI is on the way to question him, says he will try to make bond and has \$2,000, though he does not say where. FBI agents arrive to question him. He says little or nothing beyond his name. McVeigh is taken from the Perry jail, where onlookers shout "Baby Killer!" at him, and driven to Tinker Air Force Base outside Oklahoma City. FBI agents search McVeigh's car, still parked by Interstate 35 where he had been stopped. They find a handwritten note in the car saying it has mechanical troubles and should not be towed, a note that could have been used in Oklahoma City before the blast. They also find a business card from Paulsen Military Supply in Antigo, Wis. On it is scrawled a brief notation that more explosives were needed from "David." The car also contains some pamphlets about the Waco confrontation and retaliation against federal agents. McVeigh's clothes have traces of bomb-making materials on them, including chemicals on his shirt released when a detonator is lit. McVeigh is booked on capital charges related to the bombing. The Nichols brothers are detained as material witnesses. Extensive supplies of bomb-making materials are found on their property. The manhunt begins for John Doe No. 2 and other unidentified suspects believed to have been involved in the terrorist enterprise. CAPTION: Timothy James McVeigh. CAPTION: Terry Lynn Nichols. CAPTION: Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Tex. CAPTION: FBI sketch of Suspect No. 2 CAPTION: Charles D. Hanger. CAPTION: Alfred P. Murrah federal building.

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