

President Vows New Crackdown/Clinton Seeks Additional Power to Keep Track of Extremists

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OKLAHOMA CITY -- President Clinton vowed Sunday to launch a new federal crackdown on extreme individuals and paramilitary groups who advocate violence, and he angrily denounced Americans who have tried to memorialize the Branch Davidians as anti-government "heroes.

Pledging to do everything in his power to prevent tragedies like the Oklahoma City bombing from occurring again, Clinton said he would seek additional legislation in Congress that will give federal authorities new powers to infiltrate extreme groups and to monitor the activities of anyone thought to be engaged in terrorism.

At the same time, Clinton also called on Americans to refrain from using inflammatory political rhetoric or conducting themselves in a way that might move radical individuals or extremists groups to violence.

"We're going to have to examine ourselves, our souls and our conduct if we want it to be different," Clinton said in an interview with CBS-TV's "60 Minutes" shortly after he led the nation in a prayer service for the adults and children killed in the bombing of the federal building April 19.

Clinton refused to comment on emerging information that there may have been a link between the federal assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco on April 19, 1993, and the Oklahoma City bombing, which came on the second anniversary of the assault.

The FBI has said that Timothy McVeigh, who has been charged in the Oklahoma City bombing, was agitated by the federal assault on the Waco cult two years ago. But Clinton denounced those who believe the federal government acted wrongly in forcing a showdown with the Branch Davidians, who he said had murdered their own children as well as federal officers trying to enforce the law.

"I cannot believe that any patriotic American believes that the conduct of those people at Waco justifies the kind of outrageous behavior we have seen here at Oklahoma City or the kind of inflammatory rhetoric we are hearing all across the country today," he said. "It is wrong."

"And I think that to make those people heroes after what they did -- killing our innocent federal officials and then killing their own children -- is evidence of what is wrong," Clinton said, referring to the extreme, anti-government views that may have led to the Oklahoma City tragedy.

Earlier, in a memorial service for the victims of the bombing, Clinton declared again that those responsible would be brought to justice, and hinted of even stronger action to curtail extreme paramilitary groups that are popping up across the country.

Speaking to some 20,000 people, many of them sobbing or trying to calm crying children, Clinton said the country has a "duty to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil."

"They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life," he said.

On "60 Minutes," Clinton urged Congress to pass the Omnibus Antiterrorist Act of 1995, which was sent to Congress last year in order to provide the federal government with more authority to fight terrorism. But he also said he would seek additional legislation that could give the FBI and other federal agencies increased power to keep track of violent groups or individuals.

The legislation would make it easier for authorities to infiltrate organizations and to access personal telephone records, hotel registrations and consumer credit card accounts. It would also create a special FBI counterterrorist and counterintelligence fund, which would finance a new federal interagency, "Domestic Counterterrorism Center," that would be headed by the FBI.

In addition, Clinton said he also directed Attorney General Janet Reno, FBI Director Louis Freeh and National Security Adviser Anthony Lake to recommend further steps that he can take to combat domestic and foreign terrorism. White House officials said Reno had also been asked by the president to head a Cabinet-level committee to recommend what further precautions can be taken to protect the estimated 8,000 federal buildings and facilities nationwide.

"The president wants to make the strongest stand possible against terrorism, both domestic and foreign," said White House senior adviser George Stephanopoulos. But he said the measures would "strike a balance between civil libertarian concerns and our need to do all we can to stop criminal activity before it occurs."

In the CBS interview, Clinton likened his call for a crackdown on extremists to the decision years ago to place metal detectors in airports. He said Americans did not really give up any of their liberties when that safety precaution was taken.

Likewise, he said his initiatives would not force Americans "to give up our liberties. But I do think we have to have more discipline and we have to be more willing to see serious threats to our liberties properly investigated.

"We're going to have to be very, very tough in dealing with this," Clinton said, adding that we "cannot allow our country to be subjected" to the ordeal that "these poor people in Oklahoma have been dealing with for these last few days."

Clinton never referred in the interview to any paramilitary group by name, saying he had no evidence that any particular organization had been tied to the bombing.

Clinton expressed concern about the extreme views of many of them, saying that they had the right to believe what they wanted, to bear arms and to "wear uniforms" on the weekends. "But they do not have a right to go out and kill innocent people," or violate the law and then try to kill authorities "who come on their property" and attempt to arrest them, he said.

Clinton said he found it hard to believe that "any patriotic American" would be attracted to their anti-government, violent rhetoric.

Before Clinton spoke at the prayer service for the victims of the bombing, he met privately with rescue workers and law enforcement officials still digging through the debris at the federal building in hopes of finding more people alive.

Clinton was told that more than 100 tons of concrete and steel had been cleared away by hand since the bombing.

"Words can't describe how proud I am of all the work you people have done," Clinton said, adding that he hoped his visit to Oklahoma City did not disrupt rescue efforts in any way.

Clinton chose not to visit the site of the blast, aides said, because he feared that his appearance would detract from the ongoing work there. "It's still a crime scene," said one White House official. "He didn't want to get in the way of rescue efforts or the work investigators are still doing at the building."

During the meeting, Clinton was introduced to Oklahoma state trooper Charles Hanger, who was the officer who arrested bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh barely an hour and a half after the explosion.

As he was leaving, Clinton thanked everyone for their efforts, adding, "especially that man at the end of the table."

"You may make a lot more arrests in your life," he said to Hanger, "but none that would make so many people happy."

"I'm just glad I was there," Hanger replied