

# APPARENT BUNGLING LEAVES TRAIL OF CLUES LEADING TO MCVEIGH

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Timothy J. McVeigh, the man accused of carrying out the deadliest crime in U.S. history, left a trail of clues that a novice flatfoot would have tripped over in the dark.

That has left many Americans -- including some investigators in the case -- wondering how the suspect in the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City could have succeeded while bungling so badly.

If he is the culprit, is he inept? Is he crazy? Or was he indifferent to getting caught, even eager to be linked to his horrific act?

Perhaps one of the hardest things to accept in the tragedy's wake, say experts in criminal psychology, is that McVeigh and any associates do not appear geniuses of crime. If they can do this, does it mean that anybody can?

"What shocks me is that a loser like this could pull off an act of this magnitude," said Robert Ressler of Virginia, a criminologist who helped establish the FBI's behavioral science unit. "It just shows how far we've gone in this country in producing people who can create that kind of havoc."

With limited information to go on, experts such as Ressler only can speculate about the significance of McVeigh's reported links to anti-government militias, his mental health and whether the evidence he purportedly left shows that, in Ross Perot's words, he is "slower than Forrest Gump."

Some contend the bombers were dumb but lucky.

"They were not the sharpest cookies in the jar," said Peter DiVasto, an Albuquerque psychologist with expertise in dealing with terrorists. "This scenario could just as easily have ended with them blowing up their farmhouse or with 4,000 pounds of fertilizer sitting outside the federal building for two days."

Others see the man accused in the bombing as a novice, but more importantly as a zealot and self-appointed martyr.

Whatever the reason, there's no doubt that investigators had a broad path to follow.

For starters, the vehicle identification numbers were not removed from the rented Ryder truck that the FBI believes he converted into a car bomb.

Recent history has amply demonstrated the consequences of not erasing the numbers: The same mistake cost the World Trade Center bombers their freedom.

The man identified as McVeigh and a companion, whom police have dubbed John Doe No. 2, went into the Ryder office in Junction City, Kan., to rent the truck. That allowed a clerk to give authorities enough information for composite sketches of the pair.

Although a false name was used in renting the truck, McVeigh spent several days preceding the bombing in a Junction City motel, registered under his own name.

The address he gave, which also appears on his driver's license, is for the Michigan farm of James Nichols. Nichols and his brother, Terry, also have been detained in connection with the bombing.

According to reports, McVeigh asked passers-by directions to the federal building.

An Oklahoma state trooper took McVeigh into custody 90 minutes after the bombing because he noticed that McVeigh's car had no license plates.

When McVeigh was booked into jail, he listed James Nichols as his next of kin and gave Nichols' address as his own.

The trooper later found a note in his patrol car. It discussed acquiring TNT, the explosive authorities believe may have been used as a "booster" to ignite the ammonium nitrate fertilizer bomb.

When authorities searched the Herington, Kan., home of Terry Nichols, they found barrels made of blue plastic that resembled shards of plastic found at the blast site.

Some men who knew McVeigh during his years as an Army infantryman and Desert Storm veteran said such apparent ineptitude did not square with their experience of him.

"He was a super-intelligent person," said Walter Crager, who served with McVeigh and now lives in Dayton, Ohio.

Kerry Kling, who served six months in the same platoon with McVeigh, said his former squad leader's intelligence went beyond the ability to carry out directives.

"He was good at following orders, but he could also think on his own," said Kling, who now lives in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

But one expert on violent behavior said McVeigh's intelligence or his competence in past roles is not at issue.

"This is the first time he has done this," said N.G. Berrill, a professor of forensic psychology at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice. "For all of the military training, they certainly do not train you to do this."