

Nichols Says McVeigh Vowed `Something Big'

Witness Places Suspect in Oklahoma April 16



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Federal prosecutors said yesterday a key witness in the Oklahoma City bombing case has told them he drove Timothy James McVeigh from Oklahoma City to Kansas three days before the bombing and that during the ride McVeigh told him "something big" was about to happen.

The information provided by Terry Lynn Nichols, one of two brothers being held as material witnesses in the case, for the first time places McVeigh in Oklahoma City before April 19, the day a bomb exploded outside the federal building there. McVeigh is the prime suspect in the case and is being held in Oklahoma.

McVeigh called Nichols from Oklahoma City at 3 p.m., April 16, and asked Nichols to drive down from his home in Herington, Kan., pick him up, and take him back to the motel near Fort Riley where McVeigh had been staying that week, according to a chronology of the key suspect's activities pieced together by federal agents who have interviewed Nichols.

On the drive north, Nichols told investigators, McVeigh warned him that "something big is going to happen."

"Are you going to rob a bank?" Nichols said he responded.

"Something big is going to happen," McVeigh repeated.

Nichols also said that the next day McVeigh borrowed his pickup truck and later showed him a storage shed he had rented in Junction City, Kan. McVeigh instructed Nichols to clean out the shed for him "if I don't come back in a while," according to Randy Rathbun, the U.S. attorney for Kansas, who presented the account at Nichols's bond hearing in Wichita yesterday.

Nichols told investigators he followed McVeigh's directions and cleaned out the shed April 20, the day after the bombing.

Prosecutors also revealed at yesterday's hearing that neighbors of Nichols in Herington reported seeing several white men around his house at various times April 17, the day he and McVeigh returned from Oklahoma City. Two of those men, according to what neighbors told investigators, fit the descriptions of McVeigh and his suspected accomplice, the man identified by federal authorities as John Doe No. 2., who is still at large.

Prosecutors said a search of Nichols's property in Herington turned up a 60mm antitank rocket, 33 guns, a measuring device for fuel oil, four 55-gallon plastic drums with blue lids and pamphlets disparaging the federal confrontation with David Koresh and the Branch Davidians at their compound outside Waco, Tex., in 1993 -- the event that has emerged as a cause for the anti-government paramilitary netherworld that has been linked tangentially to the Oklahoma City case.

Nichols was ordered held without bond by U.S. District Judge Monti Belot after the 90-minute hearing.

While filling in some holes in a possible scenario of activities preceding the bombing, the new details presented by prosecutors yesterday still left several questions unanswered. One such question is why McVeigh did not have a car in which he could drive back from Oklahoma City. He was arrested by police less than two hours after the bombing driving up the interstate in a yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis. Why did he not use that car to get back to Junction City on April 16?

One possible explanation is that he might have first driven to Oklahoma City in the Mercury and left it there as the getaway car. It was spotted by witnesses before the bomb blast, parked on a city street, with a note on the windshield saying it had engine trouble and should not be moved. In that scenario, the suspect had to leave the getaway car at the scene and get a ride back to Kansas so he could return with the rental truck carrying the lethal bomb.

Nichols was stone-faced at his court appearance in Wichita. He wore the same brown shirt, blue jeans without a belt, and tennis shoes he was wearing when he was detained last week. He was represented by a public defender, Steve Gradert. One of the arguments made on his behalf was that the materials investigators found on his property were not unusual for someone in the military supply business, as Nichols said he was, and were items any person might have in his house. Laughter echoed in the courtroom a moment later when it was pointed out that the average person likely

would not possess an antitank rocket. According to the prosecutors, when law enforcement authorities arrested Nichols and read him his rights, he waved them off, muttering that the process was one that "reminded him of Nazi Germany."

As they added more circumstantial evidence to their case against McVeigh yesterday, federal authorities also deepened their supposition that the bombing was the act of a larger group of four, and possibly more. One possible piece of evidence in that regard was a small piece of paper that McVeigh apparently left behind in a patrol car after being arrested last week. The item, described by sources as a business card, had writing on it that referred to needing five more sticks of TNT by May 1. The card had the name David on it. Investigators considered it a promising lead, though they were uncertain whether the name belonged to a legitimate supplier of explosives or a member of the alleged bombing conspiracy.

Authorities have traced the business card to a Wisconsin gun dealer who one source said is now under investigation and has not been ruled out as a suspect. The source declined to name the gun dealer or say where in Wisconsin he lives.

"We have never put a limit on the number of suspects," said one senior official.

Federal officials say they have received nearly 10,000 telephone calls on the FBI toll-free hot line, about 7,000 of which they have deemed credible. Investigators are trying to check out each of those, leading to a number of reports of suspects being questioned at locations around the country.

FBI Director Louis J. Freeh, in his first visit to Oklahoma City yesterday, declared that those who "committed this outrageously brutal crime" will be apprehended. "There is no place on Earth where you will be safe from the most powerful forces of justice," Freeh said. "You are what the law condemns as *hostes humani generis* -- enemies of all mankind."

McVeigh, who remains the only person arrested and charged in the bombing, has refused to talk, calling himself a "prisoner of war." The FBI has considered bringing his father to Oklahoma City to try to persuade the 27-year-old former serviceman and veteran of Operation Desert Storm to cooperate with authorities.

McVeigh's silence now stands in contrast to occasional past moments of outspokenness. Described frequently as a very quiet young man, McVeigh was stirred on two occasions after his discharge from the Army to write letters to the editor of his hometown newspaper outside Buffalo. The Lockport (N.Y.) Union Sun & Journal yesterday republished two letters from McVeigh first published in its newspaper three years ago.

The first letter, published Feb. 11, 1992, was a fairly broad diatribe about crime being out of control, prisons being overcrowded, and politicians eroding faith in the American dream by raising their salaries and taxes on the working class, and constantly seeking the quick fix instead of permanent solutions -- the sort of letter that appears in newspapers around the country nearly every day from disillusioned citizens. The final paragraph, however, suggests some of the strong emotions stirring in young McVeigh.

"Is a civil war imminent?" he wrote. "Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might."

The second letter, published on March 10, 1992, was an odd screed, parts of which read like a brochure from the animal rights movement, making a strong argument against the way humans harvest cattle to satisfy their hunger for meat. But other parts hinted at McVeigh's darker side, detailing how the throats of cattle are slit with machetes and power saws. "Would you rather die while living heavily or die while leading a miserable life?" McVeigh asked in the letter. "You tell me which is more humane."

In fretting over the way humans treat cattle, McVeigh offered a side to his personality that seemed to contradict that of a coldblooded murderer who could detonate a bomb that would wipe out a day-care center and kill so many infants and toddlers. There was one report yesterday, from a psychologist in New York, claiming that McVeigh did not know there were children in the federal building. Charles Bahn, a forensic psychologist at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, told Reuter that he learned from federal officials that McVeigh told police "that he did not know the children were there." If true, that apparently marks the only time McVeigh has broken his silence since his arrest.

There had been speculation that one of the motives for the attack might have been revenge for the conflagration near Waco in which 17 children died, and that the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing specifically targeted it knowing that it housed a day-care center.

The focus of the criminal investigation was largely in Kansas, where both McVeigh and Terry Nichols lived before the bombing. While prosecutors were in court in Wichita for the bond hearing for Nichols, investigators in Herington located the shed that McVeigh had instructed Nichols to clean. They swabbed it for an explosives analysis.

In a courtroom in Oklahoma City, McVeigh's lawyer, John W. Coyle, was told by a federal magistrate that he could not resign from the case, as he had requested.

Maraniss reported from Washington, Heath from Wichita. Staff writers Pierre Thomas in Washington and Paul Duggan in Oklahoma City contributed to this report.