

Probe Slows as Agents Sift Leads

Investigators Scrutinize Associates of Jailed Suspect, Hoping to Find John Doe No. 2

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After their dramatic early breakthrough in identifying and capturing one alleged participant in the Oklahoma City bombing and two of his associates, federal law enforcement officials conceded yesterday that their investigation has moved into what could become a protracted, painstaking process of sifting through hundreds of potential leads and shadowy possibilities.

Investigators said they were scrutinizing a half dozen men who were known associates of Timothy James McVeigh, the only person charged so far in the deadly attack, to determine if any of them are John Doe No. 2, McVeigh's alleged accomplice. They are also moving methodically through lists of every person who came in contact with McVeigh, 27, during his years in the Army and his time afterward in Decker, Mich., and Kingman, Ariz.

"We are in the nonglamorous phase, running down leads that sometimes go nowhere," said a federal law enforcement official. "This is a time when morale could start to go down a bit. But we will get him {John Doe No. 2}, and/or them. This is too important."

As the investigation continued, President Clinton called on Congress to avoid quibbling over his anti-terrorism legislative package and to quickly adopt it without political game-playing.

In Oklahoma City the official death toll stood at 109 with search crews excavating another seven bodies from the ruins of the nine-story Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Officials said 73 to 79 people remained missing.

Late Thursday shifting rubble prompted firefighters to suspend what had been steady progress in penetrating the central pile known as "the pit." When work resumed, crews concentrated on reducing the surrounding debris, and with it the risk of concrete cascading onto rescuers.

"If you took a puzzle box and dumped all those pieces on the floor, then picked up one piece, it would move another piece too," said Oklahoma City Fire Department spokesman John H. Long. "That debris is just huge puzzle pieces that are interconnected."

McVeigh remains in custody without bail on a single charge of destroying federal property with a bomb. Two brothers, Terry Lynn Nichols and James Douglas Nichols, are also in custody on unrelated explosives charges while investigators decide whether to charge them in the bombing. More than 1,000 federal agents are working on the nationwide investigation into the bombing, the worst act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history.

Investigators originally pursued the theory that the bombing -- which may have been designed as an act of grim retaliation on the second anniversary of the confrontation between federal agents and Branch Davidians near Waco, Tex. -- was hatched at the Nichols's farm in Decker, Mich. But they are also considering the possibility that McVeigh and paramilitary associates planned the attack from Kingman.

Law enforcement officials have been investigating McVeigh's ties to far-right militia groups in Kansas, where he served at Fort Riley, in Arizona and Michigan, as well as the possibility that he was involved in a violent spinoff of those groups. In Kingman, authorities continued to question locals about a Feb. 27 explosion near a trailer park not far from where McVeigh resided. They believe the explosion could have been a test run for the Oklahoma City bombing. Federal agents also investigated McVeigh's apparent link to a Wisconsin gun dealer and may request that the dealer appear before a federal grand jury next week.

"We are hitting every associate he has in the country," said a senior law enforcement official. "We are talking to military buddies, everyone." The source said federal agents have developed a working list of people who might have assisted in the bombing.

FBI spokesman Weldon L. Kennedy on Thursday said that investigators continue to canvass major routes connecting Kansas and Oklahoma for any trace of McVeigh's alleged accomplice.

"We have been sending agents to every motel, restaurant, convenience store in the surrounding metropolitan area of Oklahoma City as well as up the two {highway} corridors between here and Junction City, Kansas," he said. "They've hit every single place that would possibly provide accommodations, food service, etcetera."

The 4,800-pound bomb took several thousand dollars to construct and investigators were exploring how McVeigh, who had no steady job for months, could have acquired the money for such a plot. They said they were exploring whether he was involved in the illegal sale of firearms at gun shows. They were also checking a tip that he had attempted to sell a military-style rocket launcher under the name of T. Tuttle in a right-wing publication of the Liberty Lobby. McVeigh is also a suspect in a series of bank robberies in the Midwest.

Investigators also were reviewing the possibility that there was another getaway car besides the yellow Mercury sedan McVeigh was driving when arrested. A videotape from a security camera on a nearby apartment building shows that a Ford Explorer truck rolled past the camera about five seconds before the Ryder truck used in the bombing. Federal agents are also checking a tip that a truck was traveling with McVeigh's yellow sedan before his arrest on a motor vehicle violation 90 minutes after the explosion.

McVeigh, meanwhile, continued to refuse to cooperate with federal investigators, maintaining his stance that he is a political prisoner of war. One source said McVeigh had begun giving name, rank and serial number in response to questioning, and another said he wondered whether McVeigh had been "brainwashed." FBI behavioralists are planning to complete a study of McVeigh's personality to determine whether he was capable of designing and executing the somewhat sophisticated bomb plot or whether he was a mere foot soldier in someone else's operation.

Federal court stenographers in Oklahoma released a 175-page transcript of McVeigh's preliminary hearing Thursday at which an FBI agent testified that several witnesses had seen a Ryder truck, a yellow Mercury and a man strongly resembling McVeigh in the area of the federal building minutes before the blast.

The agent, John Hersley, also testified that investigators examining McVeigh's clothing after his arrest found traces of an explosive substance known as PETN -- Penta Erythratol Tetral Nitrate. Hersley described it as "an explosive that is commonly used in detonating cord." A detonating cord is sometimes used to ignite a higher explosive.

Clinton said he was "encouraged so far" by the response of lawmakers from both parties to legislation he unveiled as a response to the bombing. But he said, "We must not allow politics to drag us into endless quibbling over an important national item."

White House officials said the president was concerned that the legislation could serve as a "magnet" for pet congressional projects, entangling it in arguments over other issues. "We are just laying the groundwork for that not to happen," a senior official said.

Clinton made his remarks at a ceremony honoring the nation's teacher of the year, Elaine Griffin from Alaska. He said his proposal "reassures the American people that we are doing all we can to protect them and, most importantly, their children."

He said the bombing, which killed at least 15 children, had left all Americans moved by "the plight of innocent children."

Clinton wants to hire 1,000 new law enforcement personnel to fight terrorism, to mark chemicals used in bomb-making with traceable material, to elevate certain terrorism acts to federal crimes and to give federal officials more leeway in gathering information in domestic terrorism investigations. Staff writers Paul Duggan and Karl Vick in Oklahoma City and Ann Devroy in Washington contributed to this report.