

# McVeigh Denies Bombing Involvement; In Magazine Interview, Suspect Tries to Counter Hardened Image



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In his first interview since his arrest, Oklahoma City bombing suspect Timothy James McVeigh told Newsweek he first heard of the federal building bombing from the trooper who stopped him that morning for driving without a license plate.

This week's issue of the magazine says McVeigh also said he was deeply distressed by images of the children killed and maimed in the bombing. "Of course everyone, including myself, was horrified at the deaths of the children. It's a very tragic thing," he said.

The former Army sergeant denied published reports that, after his arrest, he refused to state anything more than his name, rank and serial number. "I never, never called myself a prisoner of war," he said.

Nor, he said, did he ever claim responsibility for the bombing, as reported last month by the New York Times in a story that quoted two unnamed people the newspaper said had talked to McVeigh in jail.

McVeigh and his friend, Terry Lynn Nichols, are the only suspects charged in the April 19 attack that left 168 people dead and wounded 500. Both are being held in federal prison in El Reno, Okla., and face the death penalty if convicted under a federal anti-terrorism law.

In the 70-minute interview, which took place Thursday in the prison in the presence of McVeigh's attorney, Stephen Jones, McVeigh said he plans to plead not guilty but added that he thinks "it will be very difficult to get a fair trial anywhere."

When asked directly whether he bombed the building, McVeigh said: "The only way we can really answer that is that we are going to plead not guilty."

The magazine described McVeigh as savvy, world-weary and very media-wise, more clever than the gun-obsessed drifter described in some profiles. He seemed bemused, according to the magazine, by speculation about the alleged plot and other possible suspects. "Yeah, here comes John Doe 2 for the 18th time," he said with a chuckle.

McVeigh resisted discussing his political views and denied published reports suggesting that he had attended meetings of anti- government militia groups or was angry over the federal siege of the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Tex.

But he acknowledged that he visited the site during the 1993 standoff and again after the raid, and said he was "bothered" by the siege. "And it must have bothered many people," he added, saying the government "most definitely" made mistakes.

He also conceded that he and former Army colleague Nichols had set off explosives at the farm of Nichols's brother, James, in Decker, Mich., but insisted they were harmless.

"It would amount to firecrackers," he said. They used plastic Pepsi bottles that burst "because of air pressure. It was like popping a paper bag."

When asked if the bombs were made of the same ammonium nitrate mix used in the 4,800-pound bomb detonated in front of the federal building, he said, "I don't know that I want to confirm that I know of any chemicals or anything else."

McVeigh described his childhood in upstate New York as average and said the Army gave him purpose.

The magazine said he appeared during the interview to be "a little nervous . . . but good-humored and self-aware." He hammed for the camera, requested more relaxed shots and apologized for his prison pallor.

Yesterday, Jones, McVeigh's attorney, released photos and a videotape that show McVeigh smiling and at ease, in contrast to the much-circulated photos of a stone-faced McVeigh in an orange jumpsuit being led out of jail two days after the bombing.

Jones said he is only trying to counter what he sees as government leaks designed to damage McVeigh's image. "The FBI wants to present him as they see him. I want to present him as he really is," he said.