

# Truck bombing inspires conspiracy theories

By David Jackson

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Former Air Force General Benton K. Partin doesn't believe that a truck bomb could have gutted the Oklahoma City federal building. He does believe that the government destroyed "vital evidence" when it demolished what remained.

"The entire nation was assaulted and we may never know who the real instigators were or why they did it, as in the Kennedy assassination," Partin once wrote in a letter to Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla.

Virtually since the moment of detonation, the Oklahoma City bombing has become the object of present fears and horrible imaginings. And — like critics of the investigation of President Kennedy's assassination more than three decades ago — many conspiracy theorists accuse the federal government.

"I believe there are agencies within the government behind the Oklahoma City bombing," said Sheila M. Reynolds, whose Arizona-based "Resurrection, The Newsletter," called the deadly explosion "an inside job" a mere four days after the event.

People who study conspiracy theories noted that many Oklahoma City bombing skeptics share the vehement anti-government views that are thought to have motivated the attack. These analysts said citizen militias and other groups critical of government can both defend and justify their views through conspiracy theories about the nation's deadliest terrorist attack.

"It's a way of explaining the world's problems," said Chip Berlet, who studies such movements for the Massachusetts-based Political Research Associates. "A conspiracy theory is a form of scapegoating."

Norman Olson, a co-founder of the Michigan Militia, said he and his colleagues do not offer theories but instead expose patterns. The Michigan gun dealer outlined a decades-long pattern of rogue government bent on destroying civil liberties, led by the "international intrigue" of the CIA.

"What we are seeing here is the centralization of power and the emergence of fascism," Olson said.

Most conspiracy theories begin with motive, according to experts. Theorists believe that the CIA killed Kennedy to prolong the Vietnam War. Oklahoma City theorists believe that the government is setting the stage for a crackdown on militias and gun ownership groups by pinning the crime on like-minded individuals

such as Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.

"I think McVeigh is another Oswald," Reynolds said.

Conspiracy theories also hang on at least a few facts, according to analysts. In the Oklahoma City case, theorists like to cite a seismograph at the nearby University of Oklahoma. It registered two "events" at the time of detonation — proof, skeptics say, of another explosion besides the sole truck bomb that federal officials say destroyed the building.

"Why is the government denying the existence of more than one bomb?" asks John Trochmann, a co-founder of the Militia of Montana.

Tom Holzer, a research geologist with the San Francisco-area office of the U.S. Geological Survey, said one explosion can trigger a number of "seismic waves," waves of energy that race through the area at different speeds. He said the Oklahoma City explosion actually triggered three events as recorded by the seismograph.

"One blast sends out different waves, just like an earthquake," Holzer said.

Those who suspect conspiracy described this explanation as no better than the JFK single-bullet theory, neither of which is to be trusted because both emanated from the self-serving government.

Trochmann stopped short of charging the government with planting a second bomb, but claimed it is again covering up evidence in a major case.

He cited the 1992 FBI shootout with Idaho white supremacist Randy Weaver, resulting in the deaths of Weaver's wife and son as well as a federal agent. He also mentioned the fiery end of the 50-day standoff between federal agents and the Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas.

"They never told the truth about what happened in northern Idaho, when they shot a woman and a boy," Trochmann said. "They didn't tell the truth at Waco. Why should we believe them now?"

Worries about the explanation of the bombing also have reached Oklahoma City. Some family members of victims, while saying they don't think the government is responsible, say they do wonder about possible negligence.

Glenn Wilburn, who lost two grandsons in the explosion, cited reports that members of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms were told not to be in the building that morning because of a bomb threat, a charge the BATF denies.

Wilburn said he doesn't think that the government did the bombing, but he does believe in a second blast. He suspects that explosives were stored illegally within the building.

"We lost two precious little babies," Wilburn said. "I think we've paid the price for the right to ask these questions."

BATF officials said five of their 13 people assigned to its Oklahoma City office were in the building at the time of the blast. The others were either out in the field or in court testifying. BATF officials also said explosives are stored in secure facilities, not office buildings.

A few victims' families have worked with Oklahoma state legislator Charles Key, who said his sources at the university, together with testimony from outsiders such as General Partin, convinced him to call for a state investigation into a possible second explosion. State officials rejected the request, but Key said he would press on.

"I think there is evidence of some kind of cover-up," said Key, a Republican from Oklahoma City.

Victims' families have submitted some questions to the Oklahoma congressional delegation. A spokesman for Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., said delegation members plan to raise these questions at upcoming congressional hearings on the Waco affair.

Tommy Wittman, assistant special agent in charge of the Dallas BATF office, agreed that victims' families have the right to ask questions, given their "incredible loss."

He had less sympathy for conspiracy theorists in general.

"It's a little disheartening that people would think government employees would be a party to something like this," Wittman said.

Fredrick Koenig, a social psychology professor at Tulane University, said suspicions can be fueled by the many rumors and unexplained events that accompany any major catastrophe.

Koenig said conspiracy theorists tend to twist facts to justify their philosophical outlook, the Oklahoma City bombing being only the latest example.

"This is a classic, clinical, paranoid response," said Koenig, who has studied how rumors are spread. "This is the nature of extremists who have a conspiracy explanation for things. They don't want to give them up. It supports their world view."

According to Koenig, there are many things that can bring together conspiracy theorists: natural cynicism, a sense of shared experience, a feeling of victimization. The Internet and other forms of modern technology also give theorists easy contact

with one another.

In the post-Communist world, Koenig said conspiracy theorists now must focus on domestic enemies, starting with the federal government.

There are any number of conspiracy charges floating around. The Dallas Morning News, for example, received a fax on Drug Enforcement Administration letterhead, purporting to be from an agent who claimed that the government is covering up the involvement of a paid informant in the bombing.

Justice Department officials scoffed at the letter, saying that they have been the subject of numerous

false accusations. One official displayed the copy of what was purported to be a legal affidavit, allegedly from a Justice Department lawyer who resigned because of government involvement in the plot.

Gerald Posner, whose book "Case Closed" argued that Lee Harvey Oswald was, indeed, the lone assassin of President Kennedy, said he doubts that the Oklahoma City bombing will reach the level of public suspicion that the Kennedy case did.

"One of the reasons the Kennedy case lasted so long was because Oswald was killed," Posner said. "There was no trial and we never saw what the evidence was."