

Ricks Blames Curbs For Intelligence Gap

By Randy Ellis
and Diana Baldwin
Staff Writers

The FBI was operating in an intelligence vacuum concerning domestic terrorism when a 4,800-pound fertilizer bomb blew up the Oklahoma City federal office building, said Bob Ricks, former agent in charge of the Oklahoma City FBI office.

"The intelligence was

nonexistent," said Ricks, who completed his last day of work with the FBI Friday and will start a new career Monday as Oklahoma's public safety commissioner.

A federal grand jury investigating the attack indicted two friends who shared an anti-government philosophy. The defendants, Timothy McVeigh, 27, and Terry Nichols, 40, face trial

next May on 11 counts involving the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

Ricks disputed suggestions he was a personal target of the attack because of his highly visible role in 1993 as the FBI's chief spokesman during a 51-day standoff with the Branch Davidian cult near Waco, Texas. Witnesses have said McVeigh visited the com-



Bob Ricks

pound during and after the siege and was extremely angry with the federal government.

The Oklahoma City bombing was on the second anniversary of the
See RICKS, Page 20-A

From Page 1-A

FBI raid on the Branch Davidians' compound, which caught fire, killing more than 80 people inside. The FBI said cultists started the fire. The standoff had begun when agents of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms tried to arrest cult leader David Koresh.

The ATF's local office was in the Murrah Building, but the FBI local office is in a high-rise building a few miles north.

"I have no indication I was ever a target," said Ricks, who was in Shawnee — at a benefit golf outing for Special Olympics — when the bomb exploded the morning of April 19.

"We had just gone to the first tee when beepers and phones started going off," he said.

Ricks, 50, blamed Congress for the FBI's current lack of intelligence information concerning anti-government groups. The bureau's ability to monitor the activities of such groups tends to be cyclical because of the changing demands of Congress, he said.

"The will of Congress continues to change, and there's no consistency. It goes in cycles, up and down," Ricks said.

The FBI had a fairly elaborate domestic terrorism intelligence network back in the early 1970s when it was looking into the activities of the "Panthers and other socialist-type organizations," Ricks said.

Congress then stepped in and conducted hearings.

"They thought the FBI was overreaching in what they were doing," Ricks said. "So what we did was we buried our head in the sand. We ended up going from actually in the thousands of investigations of individuals to a few years later we were down to about 20."

Formal guidelines restricting instances in which domestic terrorism investigations could be opened were established by former U.S. Attorney General Edward Levi in the mid-1970s, he said.

"What happened, of course, is these organizations did not go away," he said.

An outbreak of bombings in the late 1970s involving groups such as the May 19th Communist Organization and the United Freedom Front pushed the FBI back into the intelligence-gathering business, Ricks said.

"So, for a few years there, we were actively investigating domestic groups again and had a number of successes, but they were really criminal investigations. They really weren't intelligence-gathering investigations," he said.

That all changed in the early 1980s when the FBI upset Congress by launching an investigation into the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, commonly known as CISPES.

"Initially they were a suspect in the bombing of the (U.S.) Capitol" in the late 1970s, Ricks said. "That proved not to be true."

Later the group and related groups were investigated for supplying money and materials to the FMLN, which Ricks described as a communist organization that worked in opposition to the government of El Salvador.

"The trouble with it was you had groups such as nuns ... (involved) that caused great concern in Congress," Ricks said. "Even though

they might have been funneling things to a communist organization, their intent, they said, was for humanitarian relief."

The FBI's investigation was troubled by a "lack of supervision" in some instances, Ricks said.

"That was the key case, following the congressional hearings there, that pretty much took us out of the intelligence business (in the mid-1980s)," Ricks said.

The FBI was still out of the intelligence business when the bomb exploded in Oklahoma City, he said.

"As a result, we ... have a number of entities out there — these hate groups or whatever — that in some cases were carrying out activities that we probably should have been aware of," Ricks said.

"Some say that if we had been doing what we had done in the past that we probably never would have been able to stop this bombing (anyway). I have no idea. You don't know what you are going to get into until you get into it. When you have no intelligence at all with regard to groups that are advocating violence and the overthrow of the government, I think that sometimes you put yourself in an exposed position."

The Oklahoma City bombing has prompted Congress to revisit the issue, he said.

"Now the debate is going on again. Congress is looking into it. They're talking about funding a counterterrorism center. Well, they've got to decide what will be the guidance. If we're operating under the old rules, that we can't investigate anybody, why do you need a counterterrorism center?"

Ricks said he personally believes the FBI does need the capability, at least on a "limited basis," to gather intelligence on groups that might engage in domestic terrorism.

"I'm certainly not one who believes in greatly expanding or taking away our constitutional protections. That being said, though, I think there is a proper role because, again, the Constitution itself is designed to protect and defend the citizens of this country," Ricks said.

"The only way to protect someone from a prior criminal activity is to have at least a minimal intelligence-gathering role," he said.

Ricks, who had been with the FBI for 26 years, declined to discuss details of the bombing investigation.

He said he had completed his work in the bombing case.

"I think my role was complete with regard to what I had to do," he said. "Primarily, my job was to assist in assembling the investigative team that would be there for the long term, and I selected the individuals that would be involved in the direct supervision and the investigative process, and those are still the same individuals that are there."

"What I did, of course, is select the best individuals that we had in our office. It was quite a compliment to those agents that President Clinton recently said it was the best investigative team ever assembled. Except for the inspectors and higher-level supervisors who were brought in for long-time supervision, the investigative team is predominately from the Oklahoma City division which reflects well, I think, upon this division."