

## **Reports by FBI Echo Defense Portrayal of Okla. Bomb Suspect**

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OKLAHOMA CITY - Terry Nichols began talking almost the moment he surrendered two days after the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, past midnight and into the days that followed, he laid out a long and rambling story, first declaring that his former Army friend, Timothy McVeigh, could not have planted the device that killed 169 people at the site of the A.P. Murrah Federal Building.

Then he conceded it might be possible, but that he himself knew nothing about it. And then finally, that McVeigh could well have been the bomber, and that he might have "accidentally" played a role.

"I guess you really don't know what your friends will do," he said at one point, distraught and about to collapse into tears.

From dozens of pages of confidential FBI reports obtained by the Los Angeles Times comes a detailed account of the man authorities believe did not drive the truck bomb to Oklahoma City for the infamous terrorist strike, but - almost as importantly - was an ally, co-strategist and materials supplier for the man who did.

As an indicted conspirator with McVeigh in the bombing, Nichols shared a love of guns and a hatred for the federal government. And like McVeigh, he too faces the death penalty if convicted at trial next spring. Both men have pleaded not guilty.

The account generally echoes the defense's portrayal of him in recent months - that he was a friend and fellow military surplus trader with McVeigh, but not a criminal collaborator.

As a onetime farmer and junk dealer, the reports suggest, Nichols had innocent uses for all of the chemicals and equipment authorities found on his property.

But in other ways, Nichols' account may add to, rather than allay, suspicions surrounding the two defendants' movements and activities.

In elaborate detail, he outlines for investigators how he and McVeigh methodically assembled information at gun shows over the last year on how to make bombs from common agricultural compounds.

He recounts some of their travels together, including a rendezvous in downtown Oklahoma City only a few days before the blast and eerie conversations on the trip back, held partially in "code."

And the documents reveal the shift in Nichols' portrayal of his friend's likely culpability - a change that could presage a commonly anticipated defense strategy in the case - one or both defendants striving to shift blame to the other.

"I cannot believe it was him," Nichols said flatly of McVeigh. "I cannot see why he would do it."

Later, he said he was "shocked" by the indications of a possible plot, fueled in part by McVeigh's anger over federal law enforcement raids near Waco, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho. "He could be capable of doing it," Nichols said at one point. "I must not have known him that well for him to do that," he said at another.

And finally, two weeks after his arrest, Nichols was on the verge of tears in a Wichita, Kan., jail cell. Suddenly, he confided to a jail guard his dark conclusions.

"We were good friends for five years," he said, according to an investigation report. "But it looks like . . . maybe he did it. . . . And I think I may have, I may have accidentally helped him in doing it."

Michael Tigar, Nichols' defense attorney, declined Thursday to discuss specifics about his client's statements to federal investigators. But he did point out that Nichols voluntarily surrendered to authorities, only to be confronted by a "posse" of FBI agents.

Tigar said he would not characterize any of Nichols' statements to the FBI as specifically incriminating McVeigh or suggesting Nichols shared culpability.

Federal prosecutors declined to comment on the documents, whose confidentiality has been closely guarded.

Nichols, 40, drove to police in his home town of Herington, Kan., on April 21 to turn himself in after seeing U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno announce on television that McVeigh had been arrested and hearing on the radio that he too was a suspect