

Rumors Abound In Oklahoma City Bombing Case

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Like the bomb itself, the wild disbelief exploded into the air within minutes of 9:02 a.m.

Just as police were rushing to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, they issued an emergency bulletin for three Middle Eastern suspects seen running from the scene.

These "suspects" never have been found. Their existence never has even been established. They remain as elusive, as phantom-like, as unexplainable as the dozens of other conspiracy theories that, since last April 19, have shrouded the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. A staggering 168 people were killed. Another 600 were injured.

In a city and state that continues to grieve deeply, where 40,000 people are expected to attend a memorial service Friday morning to mark the one-year anniversary, a host of doubts remains about what really happened in the heart of downtown Oklahoma City. Did two ne'er-do-well Army pals pool together \$1,000 and -- acting alone -- launch the worst terrorist attack in the history of the United States? Or did others besides Timothy J. McVeigh and Terry L. Nichols help plan, prepare, finance and deliver the 4,000-pound ammonium nitrate fertilizer bomb?

Many of those who believe in conspiracy theories -- including victims themselves and relatives of those killed and injured -- are in league with McVeigh's defense attorneys in contending that a higher hand had a larger role in the bombing. And for the federal government, as the criminal case moves inexorably toward trial, that belief could create a problem that would undercut the prosecution's credibility before a jury. "There's always a natural inclination for people to want to ascribe something horrible to larger forces and larger movements," said Robert Precht, director of the Office of Public Service at the University of Michigan Law School. "It's particularly disconcerting to think that just two men working together could pull off such a horrible crime. And when you combine that with general sentiment and distrust with the federal government, you have a potent mixture there."

The imagination, indeed, has run wild. John Doe No. 2 -- once described by the FBI as McVeigh's accomplice in renting the bomb truck -- is central to the conspiracy theories. He never has been run to ground. Even reports that an innocent Fort Riley, Kan., soldier fit his description have not put away complaints that whoever this man is, he has gotten away with 168 counts of murder.

But there is more. Eyewitnesses reported hearing a series of explosions, suggesting the building's support columns were hot-wired. Geological surveys have indicated a series of ground eruptions. Some witnesses saw two and three men in and around the Ryder truck in front of the building. Some said they saw black helicopters -- the kind imagined in CIA covert operations -- hovering in the sky.

Some wonder why the brother of the governor -- himself a former high-ranking federal law enforcement official -- foretold the bombing in an unpublished novel several years ago. Some suggest the government played a direct role in the bombing to win support in Washington of a tough anti-terrorism bill and stricter gun control. Some recall seeing federal agents carrying explosives fleeing the Murrah building. Some even insist President Clinton experienced a "psychic advance notice of the event."

The most common strain running through the conspiracy theories is that federal law enforcement, at the very least, had some prior knowledge of the bombing, most likely through a government informant. But at the most recent court hearing last week in the case against McVeigh and Nichols, prosecutors strove to lay these rumors to rest.

Beth Wilkinson, a special U.S. attorney and deputy chief of the Justice Department's Terrorism and Violent Crime Section, said the government has interviewed more than 21,000 potential witnesses, taken 10,000 photographs, checked more than 1,300 hotel and motel records and almost 2,500 telephone records. A total of 1,075 interviews were conducted dealing with John Doe No. 2 alone. The result? "As of today," she said, "we have no information showing that anyone but Mr. McVeigh and Mr. Nichols were the masterminds of this bombing."

In language designed for the naysayers, she added: "It is important in this case, probably more than any other, that we show the American public that we are carrying out our obligations and trying to find the truth and justice, and not just trying to tar these defendants with the evidence that we have." But Stephen Jones, McVeigh's lead attorney, methodically has been constructing a defense that suggests the bombing was the work of others.

In seeking access to the government's trove of secret classified intelligence data, Jones has pointed to white-supremacy organizations in this country as well as militant cabals abroad like Neo-Nazi units in Germany and the Islamic Jihad. Precht believes that even if McVeigh and Nichols are found guilty and sentenced to death, the Oklahoma City conspiracy theories will live on. "They will become martyrs to these conspiracy enthusiasts," he said.