

DEFENSE CITES 4-BOMB THEORY MCVEIGH'S ATTORNEYS MAY CALL WITNESS WHO SAYS SEPARATE BLASTS STRUCK FEDERAL BUILDING

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Lawyers for accused Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh may try to call an expert witness who believes four bombs destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

Prosecutors label the theory ridiculous and plan to call their own expert to testify that the building was destroyed by one bomb made of fertilizer and fuel oil.

Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Ben Partin of Alexandria, Va., wrote a widely circulated report in 1995 concluding that the building couldn't have been destroyed by a fertilizer bomb.

Partin used photographs of the damaged support columns and mathematical calculations of the truck bomb's maximum force to theorize that it was incapable of pulverizing portions of five interior reinforced concrete columns.

He concluded that demolition charges must have been placed at the third-floor level on three street-front columns and one other column behind those.

McVeigh's attorneys don't necessarily believe Partin's conclusions but may offer them as an alternative theory. Rob Nigh, a member of the defense team, said a decision hasn't been made on whether to call Partin.

Lead McVeigh attorney Stephen Jones told a gathering of newspaper editors at the Brown Palace Thursday that he doesn't believe the evidence supports the multiple-bomb theory.

Partin did not return a call from the Rocky Mountain News.

In hearings this week in U.S. District Court, prosecutor Beth Wilkinson said the nature of the bomb will be a battleground in McVeigh's trial, to begin March 31 in Denver.

``We anticipate this will be an issue at trial," she told Judge Richard Matsch.

The government's expert, John Osteraas of Failure Analysis Associates, Palo Alto, Calif., hasn't written a report of his findings. Matsch ordered Osteraas to write it within a week.

Prosecutors can challenge Partin's credentials and try to keep his testimony out of court.

``No scientist in his right mind believes there were two bombs," Wilkinson said.

Partin's study compares the explosive force of a fertilizer-fuel oil bomb with the minimum 3,500 pounds-per-square-inch strength of the concrete columns.

By the time the blast wave reached the columns, its pressure would have dropped to 375 pounds per square inch, insufficient to destroy the columns although enough to collapse the concrete floor decks, he concluded.

Partin's report doesn't account for the possibility that the bomb was boosted with something more powerful than diesel fuel.

Literature on ammonium nitrate shows its destructive force can be boosted by greater than four times if racing or rocket fuel is used.

There is evidence that McVeigh and co-defendant Terry Nichols made several attempts to obtain nitromethane, a racing fuel, and anhydrous hydrazine, a rocket fuel.