

Oklahoma bombing has militias defensive/Groups say McVeigh not one of them

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DENVER - The audience gasped as John Trochmann, co-founder of the Montana militia, displayed a clandestine aerial photo of a Ryder truck in what he said was a military compound near Oklahoma City.

Others clucked their tongues when he read a passage in a 1988 novel by Martin Keating, the brother of the Oklahoma City mayor, about a character named Tom McVay, who blew up a building in New York City.

"Maybe it's all a coincidence," Trochmann said. "But it sure looks suspicious."

More than 150 people showed up last week at a hotel meeting room in Denver to hear Trochmann, who used part of his three-hour speech to talk about the trial of Timothy McVeigh at the federal courthouse downtown.

Most of them seemed to agree with Trochmann that the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building on April 19, 1995, was the result of a conspiracy, most likely by "government elements." If McVeigh was involved, they say, he was an unwitting pawn, a scapegoat.

Investigators claim that McVeigh, a Gulf War veteran, embraced reactionary right-wing tenets and sided with the so-called "Patriot Movement." But just about everyone at last week's meeting agreed on one thing - he is not one of them.

Indeed, militia members don't view the McVeigh trial as a rallying point as they did the deadly government sieges at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco at the remote Idaho cabin of white supremacist Randy Weaver.

"People who are serious about the movement don't really consider him to be part of the militia," said Elaine Diamond, whose baby was draped over her arm. Like many participants, Diamond said she isn't really in the militia, just sympathetic to the cause.

"I don't think anybody out there wants to be associated with McVeigh," said Capt. Paul Giovanni, Graham, acting commanding officer of the Jefferson County Company of the Colorado State Defense Force (Reserve). "There is no militia member in the country who will take ownership of him."

The perception of a McVeigh-militia connection - even though participants said there is none - gives the cause a huge image problem.

"It hurt us a lot in the public eye," Graham said.

"We've got a lot of negative opinion to overcome, now that everybody thinks we're all crazy, right-wing baby-killers," said the captain, whose business card reads "The Few, The Proud, the Tyranny-Challenged."

Even people within the militia were scared off. Within days after McVeigh was arrested, 15 men in Graham's company dropped out.

"Everybody just disappeared, and entire organizations simply self-destructed," said Graham, whose new company was thrown out of a VFW Post in Golden where they met each week. "Recruiting got tough, too."

But there is at least one militia member who doesn't discount the possibility of a connection between the bombing and the movement.

His name is Ron Cole, and he is commander of the Colorado 1st Light Infantry, which he calls the military arm of the state militia. He has been the only one to stand up for McVeigh outside the Denver courthouse.

"Everybody is blaming the bombing on Islamic terrorists or space aliens or whatever," Cole said. "I think somebody in our movement with a shorter fuse than the rest of us did this terrible thing. I only wish I had gotten to that person first to redirect his anger in a more constructive way."

"I am the only person in the movement who has the audacity to accept some responsibility for the bombing. I'm not taking credit, just being honest."

But many close to the movement believe it's the government that's stirring things up against militias.

"The sheer unknown surrounding the Oklahoma City bombing has led to speculation, some of it wild speculation, most of it false," said Charles Duke, a Republican Colorado state senator and leader of the Patriot Movement who was not at the meeting and said he's not part of the militia.

"Most of us don't want to believe it was random. If we can create an enemy, a pattern of what led up to it, then perhaps we can stop it from happening again. As for the Clinton administration, it wants to have a bugaboo, something it can blame. That implies it has control of the situation, it knows what's going on. But none of that is true."

But Tom Belanger, who said he's a 30-year veteran of the Patriot Movement, sees a silver lining to the McVeigh trial. It has brought serious attention to militias. They've become stronger and more savvy, he said.

And a bit more public-relations oriented.

The Colorado State Defense Force is trying to improve its image through volunteer community work. Last Labor Day weekend, members took a group of at-risk children to Elitch Gardens, a Denver amusement park. They are helping at a Denver health fair this week and are starting a food bank.

Trochmann said the tide has turned, and people are beginning to return to militia groups with even more dedication.

"We have no love for McVeigh," he said. "But this may be a blessing in disguise."