

Tim McVeigh's New Friends

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On the last day of February, Stephen Jones, the head of Timothy McVeigh's defense team, convened a hurried press conference, outside the federal courthouse in Denver, Colorado. It was snowing when the lawyer came out to answer reporters' questions, though the weather was the last thing on his mind that evening. The next day the Dallas Morning News was planning to publish a sensational revelation about the Oklahoma City bombing. (In anticipation of the media frenzy, the paper had already posted the story on its Web site.) Accordingly to documents received by Pete Slover of the Morning News, McVeigh had allegedly confessed to his lawyers that he had committed the crime, hi one of the more gruesome passages, McVeigh supposedly said that he wanted to blow up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in the daytime to assure a "body count."

More than any other story that had yet appeared about the trial preparations, the Dallas paper's revelation seemed to refute McVeigh's plea of innocence. Moreover, it called into question a key defense team strategy to save McVeigh from the execution chamber should he be found guilty by the court; arguing that its client was just one member of a grand conspiracy. No wonder Jones seemed so flustered as he tried to answer questions. How had such a sensitive document been leaked? Who was responsible? Wouldn't the alleged confession wreck McVeigh's chances in the forthcoming trial? The document wasn't true, Jones explained, his exposed head now lightly covered with snow: His client had never really said any such thing. Then, appearing to contradict himself, Jones went on to say that the document had been stolen. He added, somewhat cryptically, that the story might have been planted by some "pseudo journalist."

On March 3, Jones changed his story. The "confession" had allegedly been written at least a year earlier as part of an elaborate defense team ploy to get close to an important source. The press later claimed that the target was far-right leader Louis Beam. But the central mystery remained: How had the fake confession gotten into the hands of the Morning News'!

These reports were just the next bizarre twist in a case that has, over the past two years, turned ever stranger. To appreciate its full weirdness, many factors have to be taken into account. It's a story about red herrings, half-truths, farce, and the netherworld of the American far right. It's also a story about Jones' deliberate use of the media to further the goals of the defense. In particular, it's about a 45-yearold businessman turned journalist named John D. Gash. And it begins in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of the Murrah building on April 19, 1995, in which 168 people were killed. Shortly after that crime, Jones — a former Nixon aide, onetime lawyer for Abbie Hoffman, and seasoned death-row attorney - got a call from a federal judge and was asked if he would like to represent McVeigh. Jones, well used to high-profile cases, accepted on May 8.

From the outset, Jones telegraphed his intentions fairly blatantly. A key part of his strategy to save McVeigh from the death penalty, so it seemed, was to make it hard to

select a jury that didn't enter the courtroom with certain assumptions about the accused. To realize this aim, Jones required the press. If the press could plant the vital seed of doubt in the jury pool - the idea that McVeigh was just a guileless foot soldier in a far larger plot, not the mastermind of the worst act of terrorism committed on American soil in recent history - then McVeigh might escape the death penalty. With a great deal of luck, he might even get off altogether.

Jones would leave no stone unturned in his "search" for the greater conspiracy. He traveled to England to get the lowdown on IRA bombing techniques, followed up tips on the neo-Nazi movement in Germany, dropped hints about a plot in the Philippines, approached a historian to discuss a link to Cuba, and, incredibly, even attempted to connect it all to Iraq. In the United States, too, he enthusiastically pursued the notion of a sprawling, violent, anti-government conspiracy carried out by the many factions of the far right.

It's hard to tell how much Jones and his team believed in these far-flung associations, but then, finding the truth wasn't really the mandate they set for themselves. The goal was to find enough plausible evidence of conspiracy and, further, to get the media to report on Jones' adventures as well as the conspiracy theories he was trying to weave.

Encouraging the mainstream press to report on the defense team's activities wasn't easy. Those news outlets were more likely to be suspicious of Jones' motives and would see through the more farfetched theories, such as links to Iraq, the Philippines, or Cuba. To get their allegations disseminated across the country, what Jones and his defense team needed was a guide or a conduit into the world of the far right, a world that few journalists in the mainstream press could say they knew much about.

Enter J.D. Cash. Born in 1952, Cash went to the University of Tulsa, where he received an undergraduate degree in economics. After working at a Tulsa savings and loan and later in his family's real-estate business, Cash acquired a property 40 miles north of Idabel, a small town in southeastern Oklahoma, in 1992. He built a log cabin there and settled down to work on a novel about the disappearance of Nazi gold at the end of World War II. Then the bomb went off.

Cash was outraged by the crime (he lost a friend in the blast). Seven days later he walked into the offices of the McCurtain Daily Gazette (circulation: 6,500) in Idabel and told the editor and publisher, Bruce Willingham, that he had some information. Federal authorities, Cash claimed, had used the Murrah building illegally as storage space for explosives. "I didn't know the guy from Adam," Willingham told Judy Thomas of the Kansas City Star earlier this year. "But then I got [the story] confirmed from a reliable law-enforcement source that explosives really had been carried out of the building after the bombing." On May 4, 1995, the Gazette ran Cash's story. It would win a prize for investigative reporting, and thus began one of the more unlikely journalistic careers.

As of mid-March this year, the McCurtain Daily Gazette has published about 60 of Cash's stories. They are all written in a conservative tone, and throughout he takes an evenhanded view of some far-right groups, such as Christian Identity, a religious sect

that is part of the white-power movement. (Christian Identity maintains that Aryans are the true descendants of Adam and that Jews and people of color are subhuman "mud people.")

Yet, it's too simple to categorize Cash as a rightward-leaning conspiracy theorist. Despite the tone of his writing, Cash has not advocated one political point of view over another. Furthermore, as the Washington Post pointed out in early March, some of Cash's journalism has held up. Don Thrasher, a producer at ABC's 20/20 who has followed the case closely, says of Cash, "He's been out there by himself. Mostly, he provided leads for others, and [he has] proven to be pretty damn close to the truth. Most of what he has done proves to have some merit to it." Even *The New Yorker* has feted Cash in a Talk of the Town item.

Neither Stephen Jones nor J.D. Cash has recounted the circumstances of their first meeting, but it seems to have taken place not long after Jones was appointed McVeigh's lawyer. Presumably, Jones recognized the usefulness of Cash's reporting in furthering the defense team's cause, since the man from Idabel had a knack for finding information that was beyond the resources of so many other journalists. As Jones began to work with Cash, he even granted him one of the first interviews with McVeigh (though Cash would not write about this meeting).

Jones, to this day, remains cagey about his relationship with Cash. "It's true that J.D. on two occasions has assisted the defense. J.D. has access and entree to a number of people that might be described as being in this Aryan Nations, white supremacist/separatist movement. But we've never paid him, and we made it clear that he was not a defense investigator."

Since the start of his life as a reporter, Cash has become a close acquaintance of Glenn and Kathy Wilburn, the grandparents of two children killed in the blast. Glenn Wilburn is an Oklahoma City accountant. At the time of the bombing, his wife and stepdaughter, Edye Smith, worked for the Internal Revenue Service, just down the street from the Murrah building. The family had dropped off the two children, Chase and Colton, shortly before the bombing.

Together, Cash and the Wilburns have criss-crossed the region over the past two years. "We're good friend," Cash says of the Wilburns. "They bought me a cemetery plot...near Chase and Colton's." The team interviewed witnesses who say they saw a Ryder truck on the morning of the bombing and people who say they knew McVeigh or his friends. As Cash and the Wilburns went about their inquiries, they surmised that McVeigh was part of a cell of six to eight people who could be traced to Elohim City — a rural enclave in the Ozarks, close to the Arkansas border, where Christian Identity has its headquarters.

As they continued their work, Cash and the Wilburns came to believe they were compiling evidence that the FBI and other investigators had found but had chosen to ignore. They even believe that the government may have had prior knowledge of the bombing — that it happened as the result of a sting operation gone wrong. With witnesses who, in the opinion of Cash and Wilburns, hadn't been forthcoming with the

FBI, the team would let Kathy Wilburn do the talking. "We have a right to know who did this to our babies," she would say, looking straight at a balking witness.

Cash's reporting for the *McCurtain Daily Gazette* could have remained entirely obscure, unknown to the mainstream media. But Cash found an important ally in Mike Vanderboegh, a warehouse manager in Birmingham, Alabama, who runs a kind of clearinghouse for reports on the Oklahoma City bombing. "Talk about the little engine that could," Vanderboegh says. "That's the *McCurtain Daily Gazette*. They were there early and against tremendous negative feedback from the Oklahoma neighbors. They've been called many, many names. Oklahoma Associated Press refused to carry their stuff. Yet now they call J.D. up for sources to duplicate his stories."

Vanderboegh puts out the *John Doe Times* which he distributes via e-mail to more than 200 subscribers, about a quarter of whom are journalists — TV producers, reporters, editors, and researchers at, for example, the *Washington Post*, the *Kansas City Star*, the *Columbus Dispatch*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, at ABC, NBC, and CBS and overseas news outlets.

Vanderboegh makes sure the FBI sees his publication. (He expresses derision for the special agent in charge of Oklahoma, who, he claims, sings in the choir at Elohim City to ingratiate himself with its leader, the Reverend Robert Millar.)

Amateur journalism is only one of Vanderboegh's activities, however. He is also a colonel and commanding officer of the First Alabama Cavalry Regiment, a Birmingham-based militia with about 75 members. "The First Alabama Cavalry is a loose association, a small group of folks who have organized over the past three years," Vanderboegh explains, "most of our membership is white-collar professional types who, were their participation in the militia movement known, would probably suffer economically." But he makes a strong distinction between militiamen like himself and the members of racist far-right groups like the Aryan Nations. Part of Vanderboegh's mission as a self-styled publisher is to set the record straight about the militia movement, which he claims has gotten a bad rap.

Likewise, Vanderboegh says that crucial information on the Oklahoma City bombing is ignored because it often comes from non-mainstream sources associated with the far right. "While we help J.D. and Glenn gather information, the fact of the matter is...no one in the world would believe us," and so a major part of the job, he says, is to inform reporters about the work of people such as J.D. Cash.

Cash's first big scoop — the one that caught the eye of many other journalists covering the case — was published in February 1996 and revealed that McVeigh had allegedly placed a telephone call to Elohim City two weeks before the bombing. As Cash reported it, McVeigh was supposedly trying to reach one Andreas Strassmeir, a former German army lieutenant who was rumored to be a neo-Nazi. Strassmeir was acquainted with Dennis Mahon, a former Ku Klux Klan leader in Tulsa and a longtime figure in the white-power movement both in America and in Europe. As the story spun out, Strassmeir became the link between the bombing and an international terrorist

conspiracy, and this interpretation was made more plausible when Strassmeir admitted meeting McVeigh at a gun show in Tulsa in 1994.

Laura Frank of the *Tennessean* followed up on the Strassmeir story in June 1996. According to Frank, "at least three eyewitnesses say they saw Strassmeir in the tiny Kansas town where prosecutors allege McVeigh and Terry Nichols bought and stockpiled the ingredients of a bomb and where McVeigh is charged with renting the Ryder truck." Strassmeir, however, has insisted that he's never been to Kansas. But he did tell the *Tennessean* that although he didn't "know this McVeigh guy," he did come across him at the gun show. "We talked for five minutes." Since making these comments, Strassmeir has returned to Germany. By spring 1996, Cash's stories were appearing not only in the *McCurtain Daily Gazette*. They were also published in *Media Bypass* — a small anti-government magazine that made a name for itself by running a lengthy and complimentary interview with McVeigh in March 1996 — and in *Jubilee*, a Christian Identity paper, which is the main organ of the militant wing of the white resistance movement and is best known for its roving correspondent Louis Beam.

For many years, Beam was the hard J man of the far-right movement and its unquestioned leader. (Recent reports say that he's stepping down in order to spend more time with his wife and family.) Beam started out as a chopper-door gunner in Vietnam and then returned to Texas. By 1980, he had become the leader of the Ku Klux Klan in that state — the grand dragon, as the position is known.

At some point during the '80s, Beam also became an ambassador-at-large to the Aryan Nations and helped that group set up a computerized bulletin board targeting its enemies. Then, in 1988, Beam was tried for his part in a 1983 plot to overthrow the federal government and establish an all white nation in the Pacific Northwest, but he was acquitted.

It was Beam who came up with the concept of the leaderless resistance cell to replace the so-called Order. Founded in the early '80s by Bob Mathews, the Order was essentially one large organized gang whose objective was to destroy the obstacles that prevented the creation of a white homeland in the Northwest. But it proved to be easy for the FBI to target the Order's members.

To foil the tenacity of the federal authorities, Beam thought up the idea of a leaderless resistance — amorphous cells that would operate independently of one another and strike targets of opportunity across the country to advance the goals of the far-right revolution. That might mean knocking out a federal building one day or shooting a government official on another. It's not difficult to comprehend why Beam's leaderless resistance would interest Cash or the defense team. Perhaps it would suggest there were other culprits in the bombing or at least a wider plot.

A shadowy and seldom-seen figure, Beam was introduced to Cash at Jubilee's Lake Tahoe, California, gathering in April 1996 — imaginatively christened the Jubilation Celebration. Cash brought up the planned meeting with Beam in a talk with McVeigh. "I told Tim McVeigh I was going to be visiting with Mr. Beam," Cash said in an interview

sometime after the event. "Suddenly, when I mentioned the name Louis Beam, [McVeigh's] mouth was like — he leaned forward and he froze. It was like somebody put a clamp on his lips.

He wouldn't go into anything about him...He was frozen. He just stared at me." According to Cash, Richard Reyna, a top investigator for the McVeigh defense team, accompanied the reporter to Jubilation, where Cash, then a contributor to Jubilee, was scheduled to address the meeting. "I have never met a young man that I have such positive feelings for as I did for Tim McVeigh," Cash declared to the assembly. And "Tim McVeigh was a fine soldier...one of the most highly respected enlisted men." Cash added that McVeigh "believes he is fighting a war today." Reyna, Cash says, talked privately with Beam for more than three hours. However, Jones has hinted that the trip to Lake Tahoe proved to be worthless. As 1996 wore on, Cash cut himself off from the Media Bypass and Jubilee. Later, to distance himself from the Jubilee crowd still further, Cash said that he made the remarks at Jubilation only to ingratiate himself with Beam.

At the end of July 1996, Cash returned to reporting on the Strassmeir connection: The former German lieutenant was a government agent of some sort, Cash told readers of the Gazette. Claiming that he had learned this information "from the FBI," Cash said that Strassmeir was the subject of a BOLO (be on the lookout) bulletin by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), which was seeking his arrest prior to the bombing in Oklahoma City on grounds that he was an illegal alien in possession of an unlicensed firearm.

Cash farther claimed that FBI records show Strassmeir was a suspect after the bombing. So why, Cash wondered, was Strassmeir not questioned or detained? "Was Strassmeir, then, an undercover agent for a federal agency?" Cash wrote. "As reported recently by the Gazette, a high level official at the FBI said the classified computer records of the ATF contain evidence that Strassmeir was indeed a key component in the agency's espionage operation at Elohim City near Muldrow, Oklahoma, and [among] several neo-Nazi groups around the country." Although there is no concrete evidence to support Cash's claim that Strassmeir was an agent, federal investigators did bring Strassmeir in for questioning soon after the bombing. No charges were ever filed.