

Secret Weapon - Nichols' Attorney Woods to Take On The FBI

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DENVER - When Oklahoma City bombing defendant Terry Nichols walks into court each day, he'll face a small army of federal officers: Justice Department prosecutors, FBI agents, deputy marshals and others.

Few of those officers will have more law-enforcement experience than one man seated at the defense table: Ronald Woods, one of Mr. Nichols' court-appointed lawyers.

The Houstonian has been a criminal defense attorney since 1993.

Before that, most of his 30-year career was on the prosecution side. He was an FBI agent, an assistant district attorney, an assistant U.S. attorney and, from 1990 to 1993, U.S. attorney for the Southern District of Texas.

That experience, he said, gives him a rare perspective as he defends Mr. Nichols against federal murder and conspiracy charges.

"After you deal with the FBI for 30 years, as I have, you begin to know what they do, how they think and how to deal with them," he said.

He doesn't think much of the old gang.

"They don't know due process from processed cheese," he said.

"They don't have the slightest idea what is fair in criminal investigations and criminal prosecutions. " And in high-profile cases, he said, where the world is watching and demanding results, "they put the rules aside. " Chris Watney, Justice Department spokeswoman for the bombing case, said prosecutors had no response.

"Our position consistently has been that, pending trial, which is now less than two weeks away, we won't be making any public statements," she said. Jury selection will begin Sept. 29.

As a prosecutor, Mr. Woods was known as a hard-nosed, squeaky-clean law-and-order type. "He'd seek an indictment against his mother if he thought there was probable cause," said one longtime friend from Houston.

His wife, trial lawyer Patricia Hair, still kids him about the Houston newspaper article that dubbed him "a diminutive Clint Eastwood" for his silent, steely persona.

Mr. Woods, now 59, was appointed U.S. attorney by President George Bush. In recommending him, Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas, praised the University of Texas law graduate for his legal skills and "dedication to law enforcement. " The former G-man said his views haven't changed since he crossed to the other side.

What's changed, he said, is the FBI.

"Over a period of years, I've seen them become more and more dishonest, more and more deceitful," he said. "And you're seeing it every day across the country in a number of big cases. " He cited the Olympic bombing, in which the FBI tried to trick Richard Jewell into waiving his right to a lawyer, and the Unabomber case, in which results of a search of suspect Theodore Kaczynski's home were leaked to the news media.

Mr. Woods' fervor over what he perceives as the FBI's recent slide brings a chuckle from his co-counsel, Michael Tigar.

"Oh, yeah," he pipes in, with mock seriousness. "In the old days, when J. Edgar Hoover ran the FBI, by golly, and Ron Woods was an agent, it was done right. " As a self-proclaimed '60s radical, Mr. Tigar said he never much trusted the FBI.

Mr. Tigar, noted for his oratory and courtroom panache, will do most of the talking at trial. Mr. Woods' chief role has been to organize the defense case - a colossal task, both men say.

Mr. Nichols and Timothy McVeigh, his convicted co-defendant, were targets of the most extensive criminal investigation in U.S. history. Mr. Woods and the defense team have pored over 28,000 witness interviews, 600 lab reports, 6,000 pieces of physical evidence and 10,000 other documents turned over by the government.

"The thing is just huge," Mr. Woods said. "And that's what I've done over 30 years, is put together and organize cases. I can do that. " As U.S. attorney for a 43-county area of southern Texas, he presided over a staff 130 federal prosecutors. At the Nichols trial, he will cross-examine some FBI witnesses.

Woe to any who try getting slippery, said Michael Hinton, a Houston lawyer who shares office space with Mr. Woods.

"You don't want him as an enemy," he said. "Ron doesn't miss a trick. If anyone misrepresents anything, that person will feel the stiletto. " Associated Press Terry Nichols' defense attorneys Michael Tigar (left) and Ronald Woods leave the courthouse in Denver in May after sitting in on the trial of Timothy McVeigh.