

Haunting questions remain about Oklahoma City bombing



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DENVER _ With closing arguments in the trial of Terry Nichols set for Monday, haunting questions remain about how many other people, if any, were involved in the Oklahoma City bombing _ and whether they will ever be identified and prosecuted.

The Nichols defense repeatedly raised the specter of John Doe Number Two, the shadowy second man said to be Timothy McVeigh's accomplice, sought by authorities in the weeks immediately following the bombing. That John Doe was long ago dismissed by the government as a figment of witnesses' confusion.

But various defense witnesses spoke of any number of unnamed men whom they saw conferring with a man they believed to be McVeigh in the days before the bombing.

The defense cites such testimony as one reason to acquit Nichols of the charges against him in connection with the deaths of 168 people in the April 19, 1995, attack on Oklahoma City's Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. If convicted, Nichols faces the death penalty. McVeigh already has been sentenced to die.

Outside the courtroom, the defense case has provided new fodder for suspicions that the government took the easy way out in the bombing probe, prosecuting only the two most obvious suspects.

``There are murderers still walking around," said Ken Blood, an Oklahoma City businessman who was party to a successful petition drive to force impanelment of a grand jury to look into the possibility of a wider plot.

The government has never claimed that McVeigh and Nichols were the only people involved.

But federal authorities maintain that with the exception of Michael Fortier, an Army buddy of the two men who cut a deal for a reduced sentence on weapons charges in exchange for testifying against them, they never compiled enough evidence to prosecute anyone else.

Conspiracy theorists have been talking of a wider plot ever since the bombing, which took place on the second anniversary of the deadly federal raid at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. This month's Soldier of Fortune magazine features the final part of a series headlined ``Prior Warning _ Could the Feds Have Prevented the OKC Bombing?"

Charles Key, a Republican state representative who led the Oklahoma City petition drive, said that until Nichols' trial a lot of people didn't take him seriously. ``We've been called conspiracy nuts, right wing this, crazy that, you name it," he said.

Now, he said, people accost him in the post office, the grocery store, the health club. ``They say, `We thought you were crazy. We thought you were wrong. But now we know you're on the right track.'"

In the view of Key and others, a group of anti-government domestic and possibly foreign terrorists plotted for months to blow up a federal building. They claim, without offering solid proof, that the federal agents knew of the plot and ignored a series of increasingly specific warnings about an attack.

If the grand jury investigation bears out those suspicions, Blood said, both the terrorists and the government agents should be held accountable.

``There are government agencies which bumbled this whole sordid affair, and we have dead in Oklahoma because of bureaucratic bumbling," he said. ``Those same bureaucrats still hold positions to bumble tomorrow."

In both the McVeigh and Nichols trials, defense attorneys sought to introduce testimony about such a plot. In McVeigh's trial, U.S. District Judge Richard Matsch refused to allow it, saying such testimony would be irrelevant.

This week, in the Nichols trial, government informant Carol Howe was permitted to testify that she saw McVeigh with German national Andreas Strassmeier in Elohim City, a rural Oklahoma haven for white supremacists, in July 1994. At the time, Nichols was at his family's farm in Michigan.

As with the other defense witnesses, her testimony was designed to support the defense contention that McVeigh plotted with others _ not Nichols _ to destroy the building.

Howe has said she'd heard Strassmeier and others discuss blowing up a federal building. But she was not allowed to testify on that point this week. Her contentions are key to those people who believe the government knew about such a plot.

``I know too many people who were talking about that building, talking about Oklahoma City," she said in an interview on ABC's ``Prime Time Live" broadcast hours after her court appearance Wednesday. ``It could not have been coincidence."

Howe has testified twice before the Oklahoma City grand jury, which has called 54 witnesses since being impaneled June 30.

Another witness, Charles Farley, told the jury in Denver that he saw five men and a Ryder truck the day before the bombing at a lake in Kansas near the town where McVeigh rented the truck used in the bombing.

In Oklahoma, Key forced the state to convene the grand jury by collecting 13,000 signatures on a petition. Only 5,000 were required. Among his supporters is V.Z. Lawton, a recently retired federal Housing and Urban Development Department employee who was in the building when it blew apart.

``I'm trying to perceive the truth," he said of his support for the probe, ``to avenge the deaths of 58 friends that I lost."

Lawton fears that if other plotters exist, and they're not arrested, they might wreak further violence against the government. ``I'd hate to see the same thing happen again to a lot of other people," he said.

To be sure, most blast survivors, relatives and legal experts believe the FBI has focused on the right two men in McVeigh and Nichols.

``The government has made an effort in that direction (to find other plotters), but it simply has not been successful," said Christopher Mueller, a University of Colorado Law School professor who has closely followed the case. ``That's a slightly different thing" than saying the government has deliberately ignored evidence, he said.

There is no indication of when the grand jury in Oklahoma City will finish its work. It already has scheduled sessions for next month. The Nichols trial is expected to go to the jury next week.

Oklahoma has filed its own charges against McVeigh and Nichols, and plans to prosecute them, to ensure that McVeigh _ and, possibly, Nichols, if he is convicted and similarly sentenced _ will never escape the death penalty through federal appeals.

And if the grand jury elicits evidence that other people were involved in the bombing, the state ``absolutely" will prosecute them, too, said Rick Buchanan, spokesman for Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating.

``I believe that," he said. ``I believe it with all my heart."

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