

Oklahoma City Probe Leader Draws Criticism for His Claims



The Washington Times (Washington, DC)

June 22, 1998 | Richardson, Valerie

DENVER - Oklahoma state Rep. Charles Key was straddling a picnic bench outside the federal courthouse here last week, waiting for the Terry Nichols sentencing hearing to begin, when an angry woman in an elegant green suit confronted him.

"I can't believe you have the nerve to be here, Mr. Key," said Diane Leonard, whose husband died in the Oklahoma City bombing.

The bespectacled legislator looked shocked, then shook his head. "I can't believe she just did that," he said in his soft Dust Bowl twang as he watched her leave.

Then again, Mr. Key has been called worse. As founder of the private Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee, he has outraged some bombing survivors and relatives with his contention that federal authorities knew about the plot but failed to stop it.

"They [federal agents] have their two men and obviously want to close the case, but the problem is, there are glaring, gaping holes in this case," said Mr. Key. "There are other perpetrators that they clearly don't want to go after."

His critics have denounced him as a conspiracy theorist and a militia sympathizer, faulting him for using his public office to pursue the investigation. They point out that he has no direct connection to the bombing, although he worked in partnership with Glen Wilburn, who lost two grandsons in the blast. Mr. Wilburn died in July.

For those still seeking answers to questions left unanswered by the two federal trials, however, Mr. Key's committee may be the last best source. The federal probe has been scaled back, and the Oklahoma City district attorney has yet to decide whether to hold state trials.

Mr. Key's investigation, on the other hand, is humming with activity. Over the objections of the district attorney, he and a small band of victims' relatives forced a grand jury investigation into the bombing, a probe that will mark its first anniversary on June 30.

The committee went to Congress last month to push for hearings. But its tour de force could come as early as this summer in the form of a civil suit under the Federal Tort Claims Act charging that the government was aware of the plot.

So far, 475 survivors, relatives and others affected by the bombing have signed up as plaintiffs for three prospective lawsuits. Expected to be named as defendants in the complaints are the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

Timothy McVeigh, 30, was convicted of conspiracy and murder charges stemming from the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, which killed 168 persons. He was sentenced to death by lethal injection, while Nichols, 43, was given a life sentence for his conviction on conspiracy and manslaughter counts.

Those who have joined the lawsuit said they believe prosecutors have yet to reveal everything they know. Kathy Wilburn, Mr. Wilburn's widow, said she left the Nichols trial convinced "the truth did not come out."

"I think people are very skeptical of the story they've been told," said Mrs. Wilburn. "I don't know if they know what happened, but they know when they smell a rat."

The committee insists the government's theory is riddled with discrepancies: A 5,000-pound ammonium nitrate bomb wasn't big enough to destroy the building; some witnesses say they saw bomb squads at the site before the explosion; the FBI supposedly failed to check more than 1,000 fingerprints found at key locations; federal informants like Carol Howe, who said they warned of a bombing, have since been discredited.

"They killed 58 of my friends, and nobody is pursuing the other people who attempted to murder me," said bombing survivor V.Z. Lawton. Mr. Key, he said, is "one of the most honest people I know. He's dedicated - he's like a bulldog."

But Mr. Key's investigation rankles survivors like Dennis Purifoy. Many of those who signed on to the lawsuit did so "just in case," he said, not because they agree with Mr. Key's theories.

"[The lawsuit] is not a true indication of support for Key," said Mr. Purifoy. "Most people are not supportive of Charles Key and are upset by what he's done. He

purports to speak for a lot more survivors and families than he really does."

He accused Mr. Key of being too chummy with militia leaders, some of whom believe the government planned the bombing. In 1997, he said, Mr. Key appeared at the Preparedness Expo, a trade show popular with survivalists and patriots, in Mesquite, Texas.

Mr. Key's supporters say his main fault is not that he's a closet militia figure, but that he's too willing to listen to any and all manner of theories. "He's just a nice guy, and that means he'll be nice to the nuts, too," said one friend.

Mr. Key is careful to distance himself from those who blame the government for the bombing.

"We've never said the government did it or decided not to stop it," he said. "What we say is that they were planning to stop it, but they didn't get the job done. There's evidence that McVeigh and others knew they were being watched and changed the timetable on them."

Marsha Kight, whose daughter Frankie Merrell died in the bombing, isn't buying it. She likened Mr. Key to "someone on a witch hunt and there's no witch."

"He thinks the government had prior knowledge, and I just don't agree with that," she said. "I just have to believe the FBI and others did the best job they could and would bring others to justice if someone else could be found."