

# Hating game

## Former militant discovers flaws in violent philosophy

By Victoria L. Wicks  
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BURLESON, Texas — Like Timothy McVeigh, Kerry Noble knows what it feels like to deliver a bomb to a building full of unsuspecting people.

Unlike McVeigh, he never learned what it feels like to detonate it. When the moment came to set the timer, Noble picked up his briefcase full of explosives and walked away.

His target one day in 1984 was a gay church in Kansas City. His object was to secure a place in the Kingdom of God. After aborting the mission, he feared that, far from

earning points in heaven, he had risked God's wrath. "I knew I was taking a big chance," said Noble, who from 1977 until 1985 was an elder in the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord. It's a small, isolated religious community he now calls a cult.

CSA, hidden in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, embraced a violent, racist doctrine called Christian Identity. Its members believed they were called to make war on the United States government, a war that would usher in the apocalypse and the millennial rule of Christ.

They plotted to assassinate federal officials, poison municipal water supplies and bomb various sites, including the Oklahoma City federal building. Those plans failed, and CSA fell apart in 1985 when the FBI arrested its leaders.

Noble can't help but believe McVeigh was following CSA's blueprint 10 years later when he chose the target for his attack. After the bombing, "I prayed that it all be a coincidence, although I do not believe in coincidences," Noble wrote in a recently published memoir.

During the more than two years Noble spent in prison after the demise of CSA, he sorted through the events and beliefs that led him to the brink of mass murder. His book, "Tabernacle of Hate" (Voyageur), is his attempt to explain and, perhaps, to atone.

"I consider it a ministry," he said. Nothing in his upbringing marked him as an incipient terrorist, Noble said. He grew up in Abilene, attending a Baptist church. Although he was somewhat sickly and his parents divorced when he was 3, "my memories as a child were terrific," he said.

The worst thing that befell him was moving twice during high school, which prevented him from being valedictorian. "That shot all of my dreams," he said.

Then one night in 1972, after smoking marijuana, he had a dream in which God spoke to him, telling him he had the gifts of ministering and teaching. He devoured the Bible and split with his Baptist church when one elder insisted he teach church doctrines he felt were not supported by Scripture. Later he enrolled in Christ for the Nations, a Pentecostal Bible school in Dallas.

What he hungered for, he said, was someone to follow, "someone who was in touch with God and could show me the path."

He found that someone in 1977 when he and his wife visited friends who had joined a religious enclave called Zarephath-Horeb. Despite misgivings that the group might be a cult, Noble found himself drawn to its leader, James Ellison.

"I watched, mesmerized by Ellison, preaching like I'd never heard before," he wrote.

Like many cults, Zarephath-Horeb kept strictly apart from the surrounding society. Members practiced prophecy and interpreted virtually every event as some sort of sign from God. That filled a deep need, Noble said, the need not just to have faith but to know the mind of God.

In the beginning, Zarephath-Horeb saw itself as a refuge for the righteous, a place that would shelter the elect when God rained down tribulation during the last days. But preparedness became paranoia. Survivalism mutated into militancy.

Books and tapes by various fringe preachers became pieces of a puzzle that, correctly deciphered, would reveal their destiny. One preached they must have guns to counter the ZOG, the Zionist Occupational Government. Another touted Christian Identity, which says white Americans are the lost tribes of Israel, while Jews are the product of a sexual union between Eve and

Satan. Zarephath-Horeb was renamed CSA. Residents began to consort with violent white supremacists: the Klan, the Posse Comitatus, the Aryan Nations and a group in eastern Oklahoma, Elohim City.

Prophecies told James Ellison that he was sinless and invincible, the reincarnation of King David. He — and Noble — believed it.

"When you remain in isolation, a feeling of self-exultation sets in," Noble explained.

One thing Noble's story proves is that racist, anti-government propaganda works, said Mark Briskman, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League's Dallas office. "Hate rhetoric really does matter."

Through it all, Noble said, he never was really comfortable with the guns. His misgivings magnified as one after another of CSA's terrorist plots went awry.

Some of the failures were almost comical. A foray to assassinate a judge, a prosecutor and an FBI agent ended when the assassins' van got into a wreck on icy roads.

The only two acts of violence that succeeded were both the work of one man, Richard Wayne Snell. Snell, who had ties to Elohim City, was captured after killing a black state trooper. He already had murdered a pawnshop owner, wrongly believing him to be Jewish.

Noble pleaded with Ellison to abandon violence and turn back to spiritual things. Then he felt like a traitor. In a desperate bid to prove his loyalty, he traveled to Kansas City with a briefcase bomb.

The target was an adult bookstore, but the owner would not let him take the briefcase inside. So the next morning, a Sunday, he sought out a gay church.

As he sat among the worshippers, he writes in "Tabernacle of Hate," "I tried to imagine how this one lone incident would start a revolution — and knew that it could not."

On April 19, 1985, 10 years to the day before the Oklahoma City bombing, the FBI surrounded CSA, seeking to arrest Ellison. After four days of tense negotiations, headed by Noble, CSA surrendered.

Noble pleaded guilty on one count of conspiracy to possess unregistered weapons and got five years. Ellison was sentenced to 20 years on more serious weapons charges. Snell was convicted of murder and sentenced to die.

Ellison completed his parole three days before the Oklahoma City bombing and moved to Elohim City. Snell was executed on the day of the bombing and is buried at Elohim City.

Two weeks before the bombing, McVeigh placed a phone call to Elohim City. Although that is almost the only documented link between the bomber and the earlier plotters, Noble believes there must have been others.

"I have no doubt that McVeigh had some contact with Snell," he said.

As for Noble, he has joined the other side. He advises the FBI and other law enforcement agencies about the dynamics of militaristic, right-wing religious groups. His willingness not only to apologize but to reveal the inner workings of the Identity movement is "tremendously helpful," Briskman said.

Theologically, Noble has come to terms with his past by choosing to believe that CSA, all it did and all it stood for, were part of God's plan.

"I strongly believe in the sovereignty of God," he said. "I don't believe in free will. I believe that God is in control."

God, he said, had to shatter his idolatrous pride. Prison was the tool, and CSA was God's way of getting him to prison.

Does that mean, then, that the Oklahoma City bombing was within God's intention?

"Nothing has ever gotten out of his control," he replied. "Not Oklahoma City, not CSA."

On the other hand, he said, he believes each person bears responsibility for his own acts — a paradox he accepts even though he can't understand it.

While he once thought being "a good Christian" meant immersing himself in Scripture and doing exactly as it taught, he now looks to grace, not works. "There's not anything we can do to win our place," he said.

### About Books

**"I consider it a ministry."**  
— Author Kerry Noble, defining his book "Tabernacle of Hate"