

What Feds Knew Before Okla. Bombing

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By Francie Grace AP February 13, 2003, 5:20 AM

A federal informant warns that white separatists in Oklahoma are threatening "assassinations, bombings and mass shootings." The FBI secretly interviews a witness familiar with a plot to blow up the Alfred P. Murrah federal building. Other agents learn of a book being circulated that promotes a truck bombing of a government building.

The U.S. government obtained all of this intelligence before Timothy McVeigh detonated his truck bomb in 1995, but officials did not warn federal buildings managers in Oklahoma, according to government documents that detail miscommunications similar to those in the pre-Sept. 11 intelligence failures.

"It is the lack of coordination - intelligence going one way, and then going into a black hole," said Robert Sanders, a former top law enforcement official who reviewed documents obtained by The Associated Press.

Those documents show two separate federal law enforcement agencies had information before the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that suggested white supremacists living nearby were considering an attack on government buildings.

In fact, officials at FBI headquarters in Washington were so worried that white separatists at the Elohim City compound in Muldrow, Okla., might lash out on April 19, 1995 - the day Timothy McVeigh chose - that a month earlier they questioned a reformed white supremacist familiar with an earlier plot to bomb the same Murrah Building that McVeigh selected.

"I think their only real concern back then was Elohim City," said Kerry Noble, the witness questioned by the FBI on March 28, 1995, just three weeks before McVeigh detonated a truck bomb outside the building and killed more than 160 people.

Noble told AP his FBI questioners appeared particularly concerned about what Elohim City members might do on April 19 because one of their heroes, Wayne Snell, was being executed that day, and another, James Ellison, was returning to Oklahoma after ending parole in Florida.

FBI officials confirmed Noble's account.

Snell, Ellison and Noble had plotted to attack the Murrah building in 1983 with plastic explosives and rocket launchers, according to Noble and FBI officials. The plan never reached fruition, and the group was arrested in 1985 after a siege with law enforcers in Arkansas.

The FBI wasn't alone in its concerns, according to thousands of pages of federal investigative memos and handwritten notes obtained by AP.

In the days before he was executed for a 1980s murder of a pawn broker, Snell began making threats from his Arkansas prison of a bombing or explosion on April 19 to avenge his death, according to prison and FBI officials. He also had contact in his last days with members of Elohim City, who later took his remains back to their compound.

"Some of the corrections officers heard (Snell) in a visitors' room talking with people, saying there would be a large explosion or event of some type. He said the immediate reaction would be to blame it on Middle Eastern types. This was prior," said Alan Ables, a former Arkansas corrections official.

Jeff Rosenzweig, Snell's death-row attorney, said Tuesday he does not believe his client knew of McVeigh's plot beforehand, but "Snell tended to talk in apocalyptic terms and certainly, frankly, I wouldn't doubt if Snell said something bad is going to happen."

Separately, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had an informant inside Elohim City who had disclosed before the bombing that white supremacists were "preparing for a war against U.S. government." Other reports quoted members of the compound discussing plans for "assassinations, bombings and mass shootings."

The government also had information suggesting that compound members had detonated a 500-pound fertilizer bomb like the one McVeigh would use and had visited Oklahoma City several times. The FBI could never verify the detonation.

The ATF informant would tell the FBI shortly after McVeigh's bombing that Elohim City members specifically discussed targeting federal buildings in Oklahoma for "destruction through bombings." She also reported that compound members were particularly interested in April 19 as the two-year anniversary of the deadly ending of the Waco siege.

But when ATF considered raiding Elohim City two months before McVeigh struck, the then-FBI agent in charge in Oklahoma, Bob Ricks, stopped the plan.

"I do remember I told them I didn't want another Waco on our hands," Ricks said, comparing the danger of a raid on Elohim City to the ill-fated ATF action on David Koresh's compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993. "At the time, they hadn't told me everything they apparently knew."

Neither the FBI nor the ATF passed on information or misgivings to the agency that manages federal buildings in Oklahoma City. "We never received any warning of a specific threat against the Murrah building or any other building in Oklahoma," said Viki Reath, a spokeswoman for the General Services Administration.

Federal investigators said that while they had concerns, they had no information before April 19 about a specific target and had never heard of McVeigh until his arrest, which made it impossible to issue a useful warning.

"ATF, as it has said before, never had any information or evidence beforehand about the attack on the Oklahoma City building," ATF spokesman Andrew L. Lluberes said Tuesday.

Agents said they had misgivings about the credibility of the ATF informant and investigated afterward whether McVeigh had received help from Elohim City. They concluded there were no additional accomplices.

"We believe we conducted an exhaustive investigation that pursued every possible lead and ran it to ground," FBI spokesman Mike Kortan said. "We are confident that those who committed the crime have been brought to justice."

Elohim City - "City of God" in Hebrew - is about three hours east of Oklahoma City. The compound is dotted with rudimentary buildings that were frequented by leaders of the white supremacist movement in the 1990s.

The ATF agent who supervised the key informant inside Elohim City disclosed in sealed court testimony in 1997 that she had received information before McVeigh struck that federal buildings might be at risk.

The informant, Carol Howe, mentioned "threats to blow up federal buildings, didn't she?" a lawyer asked ATF agent Angela Finley Gram in sealed testimony reviewed by AP.

"In general, yes," Gram answered.

"And that was before the Oklahoma City bombing?" the lawyer asked.

"Yes," Gram answered. She said she considered the threats "general militia rhetoric" used frequently by members of Elohim City.

ATF documents show the informant provided to agents fragments of practice explosives detonated by Elohim City members and had suspicions about a possible target. "It is understood that ATF is the main enemy of the people of

EC," one report states. ATF offices were in the building McVeigh struck.

Gram also disclosed that Howe provided, before McVeigh's attack, a copy of "The Turner Diaries," a book about a plot to blow up a federal building with a truck bomb that was circulating around Elohim City. Prosecutors later would contend the book inspired McVeigh's attack.

Dan Defenbaugh, the retired FBI agent who supervised the Oklahoma City bombing investigation, said the FBI did not know about much of what the ATF learned before the bombing. He added he doesn't recall ever being told that his own Washington headquarters had debriefed Noble, the former white supremacist, about the earlier Murrah bombing plot or the suspicions of an attack on April 19.

"The biggest problem is we don't know what we know," Defenbaugh said. "I blame most of it on antiquated computers inside the bureau, which can't find information we need to have for investigations."

McVeigh's own trial attorney suspected McVeigh had received help from Elohim City, but the attorney failed to persuade a judge to allow the theory at trial even after some of the ATF documents came to light.

The documents show evidence of miscommunications not only between the FBI and ATF but within the agencies themselves.

For instance, ATF officials had evidence that the leader of the compound, Robert Millar, was among those inciting violence against the government in the weeks before McVeigh struck.

Millar "gave a sermon soliciting violence against the U.S. government," and "he brought forth his soldiers and instructed them to take whatever action necessary against the U.S. government," one ATF report from January 1995 said.

Millar made a trip to Oklahoma City about that time, and on the day of McVeigh's bombing he traveled to Arkansas to comfort Snell before his execution.

The ATF did not know that Millar was a source for the FBI, someone who provided occasional information about the compound without getting paid. That information came out two years later in court testimony by an FBI agent.

The ATF also didn't know the FBI was looking into the compound until an Oklahoma state trooper tipped the ATF in late February 1995 that the FBI also had an investigation on Elohim City.

Ricks said his FBI office in Oklahoma didn't have an ongoing investigation, and he, like Defenbaugh, was unaware of the Washington FBI debriefing of Noble about the earlier plot to blow up the Murrah building.

Noble said as soon as McVeigh struck he became certain there was a connection with the earlier plot.

"I don't see any other possibility, honestly. It is not a coincidence that he picked April 19, and even if it was, to pick the same building that we had picked? There are only a handful of people who knew about that," Noble said.

FBI officials said they suspected Millar was initially involved, but he cooperated with the investigation and eventually was ruled out as a suspect.

Millar died in 2001. His former attorney, Kirk Lyons, said he doubts his client had anything to do with McVeigh's attack, and Millar's fiery rhetoric was aimed more at uniting members at his compound than inciting violence. "He was trying to keep his followers together," Lyons said.

By John Solomon