

FBI SAW MCVEIGH LINK TO ROBBERS

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The FBI believed Timothy McVeigh tried to recruit additional help in the days before the deadly 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and gathered evidence that white supremacist bank robbers may have become involved, according to government documents never introduced at McVeigh's trial.

The retired FBI chief of the Oklahoma City investigation, Dan Defenbaugh, said he was unaware of some evidence obtained by The Associated Press and that the investigation should be reopened to determine whether the robbery gang was linked to McVeigh.

NOT SHARED

The evidence never shared with Defenbaugh's investigators or defense lawyers includes documents showing the Aryan Republican Army bank robbers had explosive blasting caps similar to those McVeigh stole and a driver's license with the name of a central player who was robbed in the Oklahoma City plot.

``If the evidence is still there, then it should be checked out," said Defenbaugh, who reviewed the documents at the request of the AP. ``If I were still in the bureau, the investigation would be reopened."

The bombing killed more than 160 people and McVeigh was put to death for it in 2001. His co-defendant, Terry Nichols, will stand trial in Oklahoma next week on state charges that carry the death penalty.

PLEA OFFER

Peter Langan, one member of the robbery gang, told the AP he plans to testify at Nichols' trial and that federal prosecutors once offered and then withdrew a plea deal for information he had about the Oklahoma City bombing.

Langan said at least three fellow gang members were in Oklahoma around the time of the bombing and one later confided to him that they had become involved. The gang ``had some liability problems as it related to Oklahoma City," Langan alleged in a phone interview from federal prison where he is serving life sentences for the robbery spree involving Midwest banks in the 1990s.

McVeigh's ex-lawyer said the evidence obtained by the AP is the strongest to date to show that the bombing conspiracy may have involved more people than McVeigh and Nichols.

`CLOSE THE CIRCLE'

``I think these pieces close the circle, and they clearly show the bombing conspiracy consisted probably of 10 conspirators," attorney Stephen Jones said. ``They [government officials] simply turned their backs on a group of people for which there is credible evidence suggesting they were involved in the murder of 160 people."

FBI and Justice Department officials declined comment, citing the upcoming trial.

Agents who worked both the McVeigh bombing and the bank robbery spree said they suspected a link between the two because of physical evidence as well as statements made by the robbers and a girlfriend.

The agents said they ruled out a connection when the bank robbers denied their involvement and provided an alibi showing they left Oklahoma three days before McVeigh's bomb detonated outside the Alfred P. Murrah federal building on April 19, 1995.

ROBBERS' ALIBI

That alibi, however, was contradicted by information Langan offered prosecutors and by car sales records showing the bank robbers were still in the Oklahoma area after they claimed to have left, FBI documents show.

Defenbaugh said that his investigators never were told about the driver's license, the blasting caps or problems with the robbers' alibi, and he first learned of them from the AP this year.

FBI officials couldn't explain why certain information from the robbery investigation wasn't shared with Defenbaugh's team, even though the two teams worked together closely.

McVeigh in 1994 stole from a quarry hundreds of construction blasting caps, some which he used to explode the Oklahoma City bomb.

The FBI spent months unsuccessfully trying to locate many of the other stolen blasting caps.

OTHER THREATS AND INCIDENTS

Intelligence about possible threats to federal buildings before Timothy McVeigh's bomb exploded April 19, 1995, and information about possible conspirators that emerged afterward wasn't always fully shared among federal agencies.

Among the incidents reported by AP and The McCurtain Daily Gazette of Idabel, Okla., over the past few years:

- * Federal officials received credible threats in early 1995 that Islamic terrorists might bomb a government building but did not take steps to fortify buildings with concrete barriers.
- * The government had a TOW anti-tank missile stowed in a locker several floors above the day care center in the Alfred P. Murrah building the day McVeigh detonated his bomb, forcing a temporary delay in evacuation and rescue efforts.
- * FBI headquarters officials were so worried that white supremacists in Oklahoma might launch an attack on April 19, 1995, to avenge the execution of one of their leaders that they flew a reformed neo-Nazi to Washington in late March and debriefed him about a 1980s plot to blow up the Murrah building. The information, however, wasn't shared with officials at the building beforehand or given to FBI investigators afterward.
- * Just weeks before McVeigh's attack, Treasury Department agents planned to raid a rural Oklahoma compound after gathering intelligence that white supremacists there were discussing a possible attack on government officials. The FBI stopped the raid, unaware of the threats against the government. Evidence later surfaced that McVeigh called the compound just 14 days before his bombing.
- * FBI agents investigating a string of bank robberies gathered evidence that members of a neo-Nazi gang might have assisted McVeigh or possessed evidence from the Oklahoma City conspiracy, but much of what they learned wasn't shared with their colleagues in the McVeigh case. The information prompted the head of the FBI's Oklahoma City investigation to call for the case to be reopened.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Caption:

photo: Timothy McVeigh (a), memorial for the Oklahoma City bombing victims (a)TOM UHLENBROCK/ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH FILE THE MONUMENT:
A visit to the memorial for the Oklahoma City bombing victims can be emotionally overwhelming.