

Former DOJ Officials Claim OKC Bombing Cover-up Began in D.C.

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Speaking on the condition that their names not be revealed, a group of former Department of Justice (DOJ) officials have told this newspaper that the FBI never seriously investigated Tim McVeigh's connections to a right-wing paramilitary training camp.

Neither, they say, were McVeigh's ties to a notorious bank robbery gang operating in the Midwest investigated. Further, FBI agents interested in working the case were thwarted by Department of Justice attorneys and by other FBI officials.

Even spoken with their identities hidden because of fears of retribution, the explosive statements are especially surprising now, coming as they do on the heels of a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision that journalists may be jailed if they refuse to reveal sources in federal cases.

That decision has reportedly already had a chilling effect on some federal whistleblowers.

In addition to the former officials' personal insights into the case, however, the newspaper has been able to corroborate much of what they have said about problems with the OKBOMB investigation with other sources and documents pertaining to the bombing of the A.P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995.

Documents from the FBI and other federal agencies involved in the OKBOMB case support their claims that the FBI failed to arrest all the persons involved and that political considerations played a role in deliberately limiting the investigation to Tim McVeigh, Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier n even though the agencies repeatedly assured bombing victims and the public that all persons involved would be brought to justice.

One former high-ranking member of the DOJ said the investigation began with five very experienced FBI commanders appointed by former director Louis Freeh to investigate the bombing.

However, the former official explained that after each of those men left the case, a less experienced agent took over the OKBOMB investigation, and the probe into other suspects' involvement suddenly ground to a halt.

One person assigned to the bombing investigation said, "I was inside the FBI office when Freeh showed up. There was a loud shouting match with our SAC.

"It wasn't long after that Bob Ricks announced he was retiring and taking a job with the Oklahoma Department of Public Safety. He left the investigation and by the time the case was transferred to Denver, the prosecutors were telling the field agents what evidence to bring them."

Prosecutors wanted only select evidence, he indicated.

"I caught hell for sending in evidence that people at Elohim City were involved. They (prosecutors in Denver) said, 'Never send us anything that points to anyone other than McVeigh and Nichols.'"

Each of the persons who contributed to this story has continued to follow media reports about the bombing for over a decade. They have come forward n albeit without attribution n to express concerns and to provide details of a government cover-up of a failed sting operation at Elohim City n a sting operation, each agrees, that may have been bungled by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF).

"I was close to the bombing case immediately," one former official told the Gazette, "and over time it became clear the White House had taken the investigation away from the FBI and handed it over to officials at the Department of Justice.

"And that's not how it works. The FBI should investigate and then turn the evidence over to them to decide if they want to proceed with a prosecution. That didn't happen in this case. In this case, after the original commanders left the case, the DOJ began calling the shots n telling field agents what they could investigate and what they couldn't."

Several law enforcement sources had previously indicated to this newspaper that they are convinced from the evidence they have seen that McVeigh was aligned with Andreas C. Strassmeir, a German military officer that some believe was still on the payroll of the Bundesweir (German military) at the time of the blast.

One former senior member of the DOJ put it in strong terms. He laid blame at the feet of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Forearms.

"I know Strassmeir was central to this crime and I believe Carol Howe, the informant, was dead right. She warned the ATF and they blew this whole thing. They knew the details of what was in the works and they messed everything up.

"FBI headquarters knew about Strassmeir's presence at the Elohim City compound and couldn't admit it. They had to find a way to work around the agents in the field. I don't think (Danny) Defenbaugh had any idea how much stuff was being withheld from him and his men."

Indeed, in the days leading up to McVeigh's planned execution, thousand of pages of documents regarding other suspects in the case suddenly began turning up in FBI field offices around the country.

With the possibility that there could be thousands of pages of important FBI interviews that attorneys for McVeigh had never seen, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft had no choice but to put off the execution until the matter could be further explored.

A former crime lab technician, Defenbaugh, suddenly was placed in the embarrassing position of having to admit the largest and most expensive investigation in history had been compromised. He left his position as Dallas SAC and entered retirement soon after thousands of pages of previously unrevealed documents surfaced.

Regarding some of the most recently discovered documents, a former DOJ official said that he is still unable to answer all the questions, but agrees with others who played a role in the OKBOMB investigation, saying Strassmeir was and still remains the key figure in the bungled sting operation and subsequent cover-up.

"We didn't do an interview with this guy," he said. "Can you believe that? Two assistant U.S. attorneys made a phone call over a year after the bombing and let an FBI agent listen and take notes. Hell, that's not a real investigation. The FBI would go straight to Berlin and get him. This is a joke."

Confirming his recollection of events, the newspaper has obtained a copy of a FD-302, which records an FBI agent's recollections of two telephone interviews with Andy Strassmeir.

Strassmeir's attorney, Kirk Lyons, was included in both overseas conference calls made at the behest of the DOJ. The first conference call took place on April 30, 1996. The second took place the following day.

Calling from Oklahoma City, special agent Lou Ann Sandstrom monitored both calls to Berlin, while DOJ lawyers Aitan Goelman and Beth Wilkinson asked several questions about Strassmeir's relationship with McVeigh.

The FD-302 notes that, "Strassmeir did not remember meeting McVeigh until he was interviewed by defense investigator Richard Reyna. Reyna told Strassmeir that McVeigh remembered meeting Strassmeir, and that Strassmeir bought several items from McVeigh.

"Reyna also told Strassmeir that McVeigh also tried to call him."

Claiming that his memory was refreshed by the visit from the defense investigator, Strassmeir said he told Reyna that he may have met McVeigh at the Tulsa Gun Show and never saw nor heard from him again.

Notes recorded by Special Agent Sandstrom also reflect the following exchange concerning a phone call McVeigh made from his motel room in Kingman, Ariz., before the bombing: "Strassmeir advised he could not recall where he was on April 5, 1995, when a call came into Elohim City for him, but believed he was out working on a nearby property, and did not receive the call.

"On April 19, 1995, Strassmeir said he and Eddie Wing were clearing a fence line on property located ten miles from Elohim City. Strassmeir could not remember the name of the property owner."

Concluding the interview, Strassmeir told Goelman and Wilkinson that, "He was not involved in the planning or execution of the Oklahoma City bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, nor did he have any foreknowledge of the bombing."

Howe revelations

Readers may recall that this newspaper published a series of articles beginning in the spring of 1997 detailing its interviews with ATF informant Carol E. Howe.

Howe, a college student and former Houston, Texas, debutante, was recruited by the Tulsa office of the ATF in the late summer of 1994. Howe accepted employment with the agency after passing a polygraph examination. As a paid confidential informant, her assignment was to infiltrate the neo-Nazi movement in eastern Oklahoma.

From trips to Elohim City in the fall of 1994, Howe quickly discovered a plot there to overthrow the government with violence. At the center of the conspiracy was the camp's paramilitary advisor "Andy the German" Strassmeir.

Howe's reports were sent to the Dallas regional office and then forwarded to Washington, D.C. Marked sensitive- confidential, her identity was simply CI-183.

The Howe file clearly indicates a violent plot at Elohim City n a plot that included "(M)ass shootings and bombings of government installations." And the person said to be urging the killings was Strassmeir.

Interviewed on Dec. 24, 1996, Howe told the Gazette, "All Andy wanted to do was blow up federal buildings. That's the truth. He even told the young radicals he was training that, if they wouldn't go to war with the U.S. government, he would leave and find a group that would."

Speaking of Elohim City spiritual advisor and founder, Robert Millar, Howe told the Gazette: "Millar even gave a sermon and urged the younger members under Andy's training to prepare for war with the government. He told them other militias would follow suit. The key date was the upcoming anniversary of Waco: April 19th."

So violent was the rhetoric at Elohim City that the Tulsa office obtained a large number of "mail covers," and phone calls were recorded at the urging of the U.S. attorney's office in Tulsa.

So complete was the undercover operation, the ATF even had a video camera installed in Howe's apartment in Tulsa where she entertained several members of the Aryan Republican Army. On one videotape, White Aryan Resistance leader Tom Metzger of California was even caught visiting the attractive young blonde's apartment.

In spite of the detailed information and recordings of the radicals, no one seemed to be able to thwart the plan. On Patriot's Day, 1995, 149 men, women and 19 children perished. Another 500 were injured.

Shortly after the bombing, the ATF boosted Howe's pay and sent her back to Elohim City. There she reported that the residents were preparing for a standoff with the government.

A few tense days later, Howe returned to Tulsa and told her ATF handler, Angela Finley Graham, that a member of the leadership at the camp confirmed the group's role in the bombing, saying simply, "We have a big secret here."

Howe knew who McVeigh was. She heard his name at the camp many times.

"It was Tuttle this or Tim Tuttle that," Howe recalled for this newspaper. "I even saw him there one time. He was walking along with Andy. He was just one of many skinheads that passed through."

Howe's work was terminated, though, shortly after she made her report public about the "big secret" at Elohim City.

According to documents in Howe's ATF file, the FBI then contacted the informant's supervisors and told them to close their investigation into Elohim City and completely back off.

Later, this newspaper obtained copies of Howe's (largely) complete file after she began cooperating with the Gazette.

Someone familiar with the ATF's investigation at Elohim City after the bombing offered an explanation for the FBI's actions.

"The FBI learned from inside that militia members were coming to Elohim City for a standoff. It was clear we were dealing with some very dangerous people who were capable of anything. We wanted to avoid more bloodshed and that's why they (ATF) had to be pushed out. If we wanted something from Elohim City, all the FBI had to do was pick up the phone and call Robert (Millar)."

That individual went on to say that he remains convinced the ATF would have eventually made the situation far worse had the agency continued to meddle with the OKBOMB case.

"Look at Waco. Just look at Waco," he repeated.

Shortly after the DOJ learned that Howe had begun giving this newspaper interviews about the plot, she was indicted in Tulsa federal court on conspiracy to make bomb threats and possession of an unregistered destructive device. However, it took the jury only a short time to find her innocent of all charges.

A member of that jury told this newspaper they were handed the case at nearly 5 pm on Friday.

"Someone said, 'I think we all know this girl has been set up by the government and we know she should go free. But why don't we order dinner from the best BBQ joint in town and eat on the government's dime one more time?'"

Even after Howe was acquitted of the charges, government officials made comments to major media, dismissing Howe as a radical, mentally deranged, or both.

To some extent the tactic has worked, but a former DOJ official said he is more convinced than ever Howe had good information.

Solid in his book

"She's solid in my book. I'd like to meet her," he said about Howe and the intelligence she uncovered at Elohim City.

"The FBI knew about Strassmeir. He was reporting to the Germans and maybe others. The bureau picked up some of the stuff on a back channel. Andy came over here as an agent... but he may have gone "native" on them and joined the radical cause he was supposed to destroy. Or, he put the bombing together to show the American's they had a problem with the neo-Nazi movement."

In a hushed voice the former Department of Justice official explained his theory: "I know this sounds terrible. But our laws at the time of the bombing were very restrictive. Janet Reno even had the FBI cranked down even more. Hell, our hands were tied and we couldn't do anything. We had to wait for them to blow up something before we could get an investigation together. Andy was a cutout!"

Someone who could sneak around and get information illegally and give it to the Germans."

"It gets worse," he explained. "Overseas, they don't let people have the rights we do here. They don't let their skinheads march around and form chapters. They bust them and put them away.

"Over in Germany and Israel they were very upset that we didn't just round all these people up and put them in jail. They think our bad guys are helping set up cells of radicals in Europe and Israel. Who knows who hired Andy? But Andy is the key and we need a grand jury investigation to get to him."