

The Pathological Legacy Of The Oklahoma City Bombing

By Charles P. Blair | Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists | April 13th, 2015

April 19 marks the 240-year anniversary of the “shot heard around the world”—that is, the opening salvos of the American Revolutionary War. Two-hundred and twenty years later, literature commemorating the Battles of Lexington and Concord was found in the front seat of a car belonging to a 27-year-old, highly decorated veteran of the Persian Gulf War. Pulled over by an Oklahoma state trooper because his car lacked a license plate, Timothy McVeigh would soon be identified as having unleashed what was then the most lethal terrorist attack in US history, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City. Arrested while wearing a [t-shirt](#) emblazoned with the image of a tree and Thomas Jefferson’s 1787 insistence that “[t]he tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” McVeigh killed 168 people, an act of terror that precipitated a massive criminal investigation. Portraying the bombing as unavoidable and its perpetrators’ motives devoid of logic, the government ostensibly concluded that only four individuals were linked to the attack, with only two of the four involved in its execution. In 1997, McVeigh and army buddy Terry Nichols were found guilty of conspiring to bomb the Murrah building. Sentenced to death, [McVeigh was executed](#) in June 2001. Nichols received a life prison sentence, while two accomplices, [Michael Fortier and his wife Lori](#), cooperated with federal prosecutors, eventually vanishing into the [federal witness protection program](#).

But it now seems likely that the bombing involved more than four individuals. Moreover, it is now known that explicit warnings of a possible attack targeting the Murrah building made it to federal agents in the months prior to the bombing. Yet, as with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the notorious “[Phoenix Memo](#),” those in federal law enforcement who did sound the alarm bells “were generally ignored by their superiors who thought [a bunch of marginal wackos could never amount to much](#),” according to the thoroughly researched 2012 book, *Oklahoma City: What the Investigation Missed* by investigative reporter Andrew Gumbel and retired Marine Lt. Col. Roger G. Charles.

Twenty years after his murderous actions, misunderstandings still revolve around Timothy McVeigh. Although he was often portrayed in the popular press as a psychopath hell-bent on senseless revenge, psychiatrists correctly concluded that McVeigh, like most terrorists, was neither irrational nor deranged. The noted terrorism expert Martha Crenshaw’s observation that “[the outstanding common characteristic of terrorists is their normalcy](#)” seems clearly to apply to McVeigh, whose acts were the product of [cold-blooded but well-reasoned political and strategic calculations](#). To catalogue and cast aside McVeigh as simply “crazy” or “evil” is to dangerously miscalculate the capabilities of other, similarly inspired far-right extremists. Indeed, the Oklahoma City bombing has etched itself deeply into the milieu—and pantheon—of far-right extremist circles. The beliefs that fused, radicalizing and galvanizing McVeigh, continue to exist; the risk of more McVeighs persists.

The incomplete investigation. Failures to intercept the plot and pursue critical evidence and other bombing suspects were largely the result of political pressures emanating from Washington, an inability to take advantage of institutional memory within federal law-enforcement (particularly regarding an earlier plot by far-right extremists to attack the Murrah building), and turf battles among the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), the United States Secret Service, and local law-enforcement, all of which had had offices in the Murrah Federal Building, and all of which were involved in the post-blast investigation. The ruinous mistrust that would pit law-enforcement agencies against one another was foreshadowed within hours of the bombing, when investigators argued bitterly over who had recovered the rear axle of the rented Ryder truck McVeigh used to transport the 5,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate and nitromethane explosive that shattered the Murrah building. But bragging rights were only part of what derailed the post-blast investigation.

Still reeling from disastrous FBI and ATF actions at [Ruby Ridge](#), Idaho, in 1992 and at the [Branch Davidian complex](#),

Mount Carmel, outside Waco, Texas in 1993, President Bill Clinton set the tone for prompt—and hopefully embarrassment-free—action by swearing “[swift, certain, and severe](#)” justice. Micro-managed by White House officials, Attorney General Janet Reno, and then-FBI director Louis Freeh, FBI investigators moved hastily to arrest Terry Nichols amid high-profile searches of his Michigan farm. Foregoing a more subtle approach that would have allowed for surveillance, such “swift” actions may well have alerted potential co-conspirators to hide or destroy evidence.

From the day of the bombing, [Elohim City](#), a 400-acre [Christian Identity](#) commune located 150 miles east of Oklahoma City, became a focus of attention with regard to possible co-conspirators. Founded in 1973 by the late Pastor Robert Millar, the oldest still-operational major racist community in the United States eventually became a refuge and meeting place for Christian Identity adherents and other far-right extremists, including members of the seminal revolutionary neo-Nazi criminal group, [the Order](#). By the early 1990s, Elohim City hosted members of the underground [Aryan Republican Army](#), a bizarre far-right group of revolutionaries responsible for nearly two dozen Midwestern bank robberies. An Oklahoma grand jury concluded in December 1998 that John Doe 2—the enigmatic figure whom more than two dozen witnesses claim to have seen accompanying McVeigh in the days and hours before the bombing—never existed and that there was no connection between the bombing and Elohim City. But the [criminologist Mark Hamm](#) and other experts have long argued that John Doe 2 did exist and that he was likely an Aryan Republican Army member. Recent statements by former federal law-enforcement officials now bolster Hamm’s claims.

Information obtained by the ATF from a confidential informant only a few months before the bombing made plain that the Murrah building likely was being targeted. Welcomed into Elohim City by Pastor Millar, the informant, a 23-year-old former debutante named Carol Howe, came into contact with Dennis Mahon, a neo-Nazi and former Grand Dragon of the Oklahoma Ku Klux Klan living at the compound. After she alleged that she had been raped by Mahon, Howe came to the attention of the ATF; she subsequently agreed to renew contact with Mahon, return to Elohim City, and act as an informant. In November 1994—six months before McVeigh’s attack—Howe described to her ATF handler a conversation she overheard between Mahon and two other residents of Elohim City about [plans to blow up a federal building](#). Howe related to her handler that Mahon explicitly identified Tulsa and Oklahoma City as possible targets, with April 19 as a probable target date. Concerned, the AFT agent filed [a report, dated November 29, 1994](#), with the word “bombing” underlined. Moreover, just two months later, Howe reported that in mid-January 1995 she had accompanied Mahon and Elohim City’s virulently anti-government security chief to Oklahoma City, where she observed the two “casing” potential federal targets.

Not only was Howe’s information disregarded by higher-ranking ATF officials, she was pulled from Elohim City just weeks before the Oklahoma City bombing. Then-ATF director John Magaw later revealed in an interview with Gumbel and Charles that, “if she had stayed put, the bomb plot might well have been discovered and thwarted.” Former deputy assistant director of the FBI Danny Coulson, the one-time head of the Elohim City probe and one of the commanders of the Oklahoma City investigation, subsequently came to believe that “the investigation into Elohim City was deliberately shut down for reasons of bureaucratic cowardice or incompetence.”

In a 2010 interview with Gumbel, one of the ATF agents responsible for monitoring Howe’s activity described how the “layers of bureaucratic infighting” between the FBI and ATF “were almost too dizzying to comprehend.” He outlined the inter-agency “logic” as follows: After receiving word that Mahon might be planning an attack, the AFT declined to move forward because, “we don’t know if the FBI or another agency may be looking at him, so we won’t. If we make an inquiry, they’ll know we want to know, and we don’t want others to know, because they’ll know we are interested, and won’t share information with *us*.” Fearful of another Waco-like standoff that could end disastrously, even after the Oklahoma City bombing, law-enforcement shied away from Elohim City. No further investigations took place, even though Carol Howe was certain not only that she recognized John Doe 2, but that—some nine months before the bombing—she saw McVeigh at Elohim City, in the company of the two men she would later overhear discussing a bombing plot with Mahon.

Weighing McVeigh. Often erroneously explained away as psychopathic, Timothy McVeigh actually comported with

psychologist and terrorism expert Clark R. McCauley's finding that, "the best documented generalization is negative; [terrorists do not show any striking psychopathology.](#)" Though abhorrent, McVeigh's actions are certainly intelligible. Examined extensively by psychiatrist John Smith in the months after the attack, McVeigh was judged as sane—"not delusional." When asked why McVeigh "would commit such a terrible crime," Smith concluded that "it was a conscious choice on his part, not because he was deranged ... or misinterpreting reality ... but [because he was serious.](#)"

While Smith assessed that McVeigh's trajectory to the Oklahoma City bombing radiated, in part, from the bomber's childhood encounters with bullies, Smith determined that McVeigh's radicalization began in earnest with his experiences in the Persian Gulf War. But warning signs emerged even before his 1988 Army enlistment. As detailed by his biographers, [Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck](#), McVeigh, having dropped out of a two-year business college, pursued a course of "self-education" largely by turning to "the literature of the rugged, fiercely independent gun culture." Such reading eventually led McVeigh to the notorious novel [The Turner Diaries](#). Written by the late [William Pierce](#)—a former physics professor who founded the neo-Nazi organization, [National Alliance](#)—*The Turner Diaries* presents a future highlighted by government oppression, firearm confiscation, and a heroic apocalyptic race war that ultimately restores America's "greatness" at the expense of "non-whites" and "white race traitors." Described by the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton as "guru in literary form," *The Turner Diaries* served as a conduit to McVeigh's later anti-government and conspiratorial views; however, it was the book's focus on draconian gun laws that initially caught McVeigh's attention.

McVeigh reportedly had a copy of *The Turner Diaries* with him when he arrived in Saudi Arabia with his Army unit in early January 1991. When the ground offensive began six weeks later, McVeigh's role as gunner for an M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle was to eliminate enemy positions before they could initiate firing. On day two of the four-day assault, McVeigh killed two Iraqi soldiers with a single round at a distance of 1,000 yards. For that he was awarded the Bronze Star. (In total, McVeigh garnered five medals for his service in Iraq.) But his war experiences left McVeigh deeply shaken and, even before he returned to the US, he became convinced that the government had deceived him and his country about the war's justification. After returning home from the war, McVeigh delved ever deeper into gun culture, immersing himself in materials depicting the "[New World Order](#)," a supranational omnipotent cabal that sought to disarm the American public as a prelude to complete control.

It was the 1993 events in Waco, Texas, that provided what McVeigh saw as the ultimate example of an unrestrained government, fully divorced from its constitutional constraints. Of profound significance was McVeigh's perception that extraconstitutional military might had displaced legitimate domestic law-enforcement, as symbolized by the presence at the Branch Davidian compound of Bradley Fighting Vehicles—the armored and well-armed infantry transport that McVeigh trained on, helped to maintain, and used in Operation Desert Storm. To McVeigh, the additional presence of two massive M1 Abrams tanks, assorted other military vehicles and aircraft, and almost 1,000 heavily-armed state and federal personnel graphically illustrated an ever-expanding and treasonous governmental onslaught against US citizens—an onslaught that promised to go far beyond the Branch Davidian compound if action was not taken.

Five months before the Oklahoma City bombing McVeigh wrote [a letter to the American Legion](#) proclaiming that, "[w]e members of the citizen's militias do not bear our arms to overthrow the Constitution, but to overthrow those who PERVERT the Constitution; if and when they once again, draw first blood (many believe the Waco incident was 'first blood')." After Waco, then, McVeigh had no doubts that the US government was now the enemy of the Constitution. Something needed to be done – quickly. "Blood will flow in the streets," he wrote a friend, "Good vs. Evil. Free men vs. Socialist Wannabe Slaves."

While awaiting his death after being found guilty on 11 counts of conspiracy and murder, McVeigh composed [another letter](#), this one to the novelist and historian Gore Vidal, arguing that his attack had three purposes. First, it was a "retaliatory strike" for the increasingly "militaristic and violent" federal actions that had gotten "to the point where ... our government—like the Chinese—was deploying tanks against its own citizens." Second, McVeigh explained that the bombing was a "pre-emptive (or pro-active) strike against [federal] forces and their command and control centers within the federal building." "When an aggressor force continually launches attacks from a particular base of

operations,” McVeigh reasoned, “it is sound military strategy to take the fight to the enemy.” Finally, McVeigh underscored that his actions were intended to “send a message” “to a government that was becoming increasingly hostile, by bombing a government building and the government employees within that building who represent that government.”

The inadequate federal handling of the Oklahoma City bombing plot and its aftermath had several far-reaching effects. As evidenced by discounted warnings relating to the attacks of 9/11, dysfunction within and between federal law-enforcement agencies can precipitate serious consequences. While the government’s disjointed behavior should have disproved McVeigh conspiratorial beliefs of a unified and highly effectual supranational alliance—the New World Order—its disregard of critical warnings prior to the bombing and aversion to pursuing additional suspects afterward only served to expand America’s far-right conspiracy culture. Governmental reluctance to expand the investigation also portended future politicization and an ongoing [underestimation of far-right extremist threats](#).

What McVeigh and Oklahoma City mean now. Propelled by an investigation that appears to have been hurried and perfunctory, disparate circles of far-right extremists have appropriated McVeigh and his actions in a variety of ways in the two decades since the Oklahoma City bombing. Some, like *The Turner Diaries* author William Piece, saw the bombing as lacking a plausible overall strategy; it was “an overly expensive message” that, “if it were part of a [broader] war ... is morally justified.” The events were also used to promote outlandish—but widely accepted—conspiracy theories: For example, utilizing McVeigh and Nichols through mind control, the New World Order supposedly had masterminded the attack, to discredit the “Patriot Movement.” Others in far-right extremist circles highlighted the long-standing conspiracy that would have Oklahoma City be home to New World Order-facilitated concentration camps and crematoria, all overseen by agencies that were housed in the Murrah building.

Although originating before the Internet became ubiquitous, the Oklahoma City bombing’s radical remnants now lie largely in [the virtual worlds of far-right extremist groups](#) and, increasingly, individuals. One need only visit “Stormfront,” the largest Internet platform for far-right hate groups and individuals (linked, since 2009, to nearly 100 murders) to discover passionate interpretations of Timothy McVeigh’s life and actions. April 19 has become, [political scientist Michael Barkun](#) observes, “talismanic.” To many far-right extremists and in the numerology of their movements, Lexington and Concord, the dismantlement of various far-right groups, the 1992 events at Ruby Ridge, the Waco siege, and the Oklahoma City bombing are all connected. To them, April 19 is a hallowed date reflecting the oppressive forces of the New World Order, “when the forces of darkness attacked the forces of light.”

Links included in this story:

- [1] <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/t-shirt.jpg>
- [2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/11/national/11CND-EXECUTE.html>
- [3] <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/mfortiertestimony.html>
- [4] <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2006/spring/domestic-terrorism>
- [5] http://fas.org/irp/congress/2002_hr/092402hill.html
- [6] <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/51606-oklahoma-city-17-years-on-a-q-a-with-andrew-gumbel.html>
- [7] <http://courses.kvasaheim.com/hist319a/docs/Crenshaw%201981.PDF>
- [8] <http://rampages.us/colombomj/wp-content/uploads/sites/2867/2014/10/Martha-Crenshaw-the-logic-of-terrorism.pdf>
- [9] <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2012/aug/19/ruby-ridge-carved-niche-history/>
- [10] <http://www.texasobserver.org/the-standoff-in-waco/>
- [11] <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51239>
- [12] http://archive.adl.org/learn/ext_us/elohim.html?LEARN_Cat=Extremism&LEARN_SubCat=Extremism_in_America&xpicked=3&item=ec
- [13] <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/ideology/christian-identity/the-christian-identity-movement>
- [14] http://www.start.umd.edu/tops/terrorist_organization_profile.asp?id=120
- [15] <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/09/us/bank-robbery-trial-offers-a-glimpse-of-a-right-wing-world.html>
- [16] http://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=188373
- [17] <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/howetestimony.htm>
- [18] http://www.motherjones.com/files/legacy/news/featurex/2007/07/Angela_Gram_04.24.97.pdf
- [19] <http://crab.rutgers.edu/~goertzel/PostTerrorism.htm>
- [20] <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2001/09/mcveigh200109>

- [21] http://www.buffalospree.com/buffalospreamagazine/archives/2001_0708/070801journalist.html
- [22] <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-files/profiles/william-pierce>
- [23] <http://www.narrg.com/>
- [24] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wUucANBY_8
- [25] <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/jennifertestimony.html>
- [26] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/may/06/mcveigh.usa>
- [27] <http://thebulletin.org/looking-clearly-right-wing-terrorism7232>
- [28] <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/publications/White-Homicide-Worldwide>
- [29] <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520276826>