5 Questions with J.M. Berger on the Oklahoma City Bombing

by Ryan Evans | April 20th, 2015

*For the latest edition of our Five Questions series, I spoke with J.M. Berger on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing, one of the most devastating attacks on American soil. J.M. is a nonresident fellow in the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution and the author of the new book,*ISIS: The State of Terror*, with Jessica Stern. While you may know him from his work on Islamist movements, he has done a great deal of work and research on domestic right-wing extremism, including the "patriot" and sovereign citizen movements. I was curious to hear what J.M. had to say on the anniversary of this tragic event, which killed 168 people and injured hundreds more.*

1. With 20 years having passed, what more have we learned about the attacks? What are the big unanswered questions that remain?

In some ways, we have a tremendous amount of data on Oklahoma City, derived from the trial of Timothy McVeigh and two trials for Terry Nichols. But in each of these, the focus was deliberately narrow, on establishing culpability for the men, and not necessarily on a broader view of the case. After September 11, the government declassified and released vast stores of information and intelligence on how plot came to be and the networks behind it.

We've never had anything close to the same kind of reckoning on Oklahoma City. In particular, the FBI has tirelessly fought against Freedom of Information Act disclosures about the case. I was able to FOIA all documents related to September 11, and while some material remains secret, I got thousands of pages released (not even counting the massive disclosures related to the 9/11 Commission). In contrast, the FBI has resisted even limited disclosures of the OKBOMB file. For instance, after they rejected my request to release the entire case file – essentially the same request I filed for the 9/11 investigation – I tried requesting only documents from the first 30 days of the investigation. That request was also rejected.

Jesse Trentadue, a Salt Lake City lawyer whose brother was killed in federal custody under suspicious circumstances, has sued the FBI over its failure to comply with FOIA in his requests for the OKBOMB documents. (He believes they will shed light on his brother's death, over which he won a wrongful death lawsuit against the federal government some years back.) The FBI has stonewalled and resisted these requests and at times been reprimanded by the judge overseeing the case for misrepresentations and failing to comply with the court's orders. The judge is now reviewing the case and has not yet issued a ruling. The pattern suggests to some people that FBI informants or undercover agents might have been involved with people involved with the plot. There is circumstantial evidence in this direction, but it is not conclusive yet.

The biggest unanswered questions pertain to whether there are conspirators who have not yet been brought to trial and whether the government had access to specific information that could have prevented the attack. For each question, we have specific leads. It's not just a broad issue that "something doesn't smell right." These are substantial questions. More substantial, for instance, than those left unanswered in the September 11investigation, despite the latter being much bigger and more complex.

After a lot of twists and turns, my investigation has narrowed down to two groups of interest. The first is a militia group associated with the Iran-Contra scandal, whose members and associates overlapped with people named in the OKBOMB investigation. I wrote about this in 2012. The second pertains to a gang of white supremacist bank robbers active during the 1990s. The FBI's investigative case file on the gang is packed with cross-references to OKBOMB,

and there are a number of irregularities around the case and the investigation that recommend it for further investigation.

2. The 9/11 attacks occupy a special place in the narrative of the jihadist movement as it speaks to one of their great and most celebrated achievements. Does the Oklahoma City bombing have a similar status in the narrative of the far right movement [is this the most appropriate term]? How do they view it? Are any far right groups celebrating the anniversary as most of us look back and mourn for the victims?

Oklahoma City was a bridge too far for most members of the Patriot movement, the loose collective of antigovernment groups and ideologies that McVeigh associated himself with. The movement retracted and retrenched for some years after the bombing. Many members were very disturbed by the presence of a daycare center in the building and the deaths of six children in the attack. The threshold for targeting is very different for Patriots relative to jihadists or even other right-wing movements like white supremacists, and they are more concerned with collateral damage. I would say the most common view of the bombing in the movement today is that is provides a cautionary tale about what can happen when the government oppresses the people (in their view, based on events like Waco and Ruby Ridge), but not necessarily that it's a model for future action or something to be celebrated. The date of April 19 also resonates deeply in the lore of American right-wing extremism, going back to the Battle of Lexington, and encompassing Waco in 1993 and an armed clash with a Christian Identity group in 1985. The date has a mythic quality that can be dangerous. For instance, the lockdown in the Boston area following the Marathon bombings in 2013 took place on April 19. Had something gone wrong during the police manhunt, resulting in the deaths of innocent people, the date would have magnified its significance as a trigger for right-wing extremists.

3. How has the landscape of the far right movement evolved since the bombing?

One of the biggest developments is the growing separation of antigovernment extremism, in the form of the Patriot movement, from white nationalism. At the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, the two movements were closely linked, with a great deal of overlap. McVeigh himself skirted the line between the two. Today, many in the Patriot movement have repudiated ideological racism and avoid contact with such groups. They object to it on both moral grounds and pragmatic grounds, meaning they perceive that the vast majority of Americans will not rally around a movement with overtly racist teachings or Nazi overtones. While there is still some common ground, and non-ideological racism can be found in ample supply in Patriot ranks, I see this as a sea change that points to the fading relevance of ideological racism. The latter is still a threat. Movements in decline often become more violent as they lose ground. But it seems to me that it is ultimately a dying creed in terms of an indigenous movement in the United States, although the Greek neo-Nazi Golden Dawn movement has been trying to re-energize it. This is good news, but these groups will likely endure in smaller numbers for generations.

One of the area showing the most growth in what we consider "right wing" extremism is the sovereign citizen movement, which is a bizarre ideology that essentially preaches an alternative history of the United States and its laws. Adherents make their own license plates and file bizarre pseudo-legal documents that can cause real problems for people at whom are directed. We've seen a number of cases in which sovereigns have become violent when faced with arrest for their behavior, or in a small but significant number of cases, taking violent action against government targets on their own initiative. The movement is very disorganized and is more ideology than organization (although some have tried to organize), but the number of adherents does seem to be on the rise.

4. How have we seen the U.S. government's approach to far right terrorism change in the last 20 years? How important was Oklahoma City in some of those changes?

The change in law enforcement posture really began before the bombing. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, far right extremism was a very high priority for the FBI, in part due to the rise of neo-Nazi movements, and they spent a lot of time and resources infiltrating and mapping these movements, with decidedly uneven results. I wrote about this in a 2012 investigative report for the New America Foundation. Because of some significant missteps, as well as concerns over encroachment on First Amendment rights, the scale of these activities had actually decreased in the months prior

to the start of the Oklahoma City plot. The government concern after the bombing seemed to be focused on closing the case as quickly and possible and characterizing it as mainly the product of a lone malcontent, McVeigh. In the years since, these groups have been monitored by the FBI and when appropriate, cases have been brought.

At a policy level, however, efforts to approach this phenomenon have become very politicized, as in 2009, when a DHS report on the topic became a political hot potato after criticism by conservatives. Policy makers are much more inclined to view terrorism as a Muslim problem through the lens of jihadism. I think this is hugely problematic for all the obvious reasons. In many ways, the legacy of Oklahoma City lies in the fact that we did not take it as a lesson, in part thanks to the Justice Department's singular focus on McVeigh as a contextless lone wolf, rather than as part of a broader movement.

This is just one reason that a fuller disclosure of the investigation as needed. Even 20 years later, there are still important questions that remain unanswered. The government has not disclosed enough about the case, and despite so much time having passed, there is still no serious book that really gives a definitive account of the bombing itself, although some have critiqued the investigation. These are important lapses in our understanding of terrorism on U.S. soil.

5. Editor's Note: As our regular readers know, the fifth question of our interviews typically focuses on something alcohol related, in the spirit of good humor. Due to the gravity of this anniversary, we are forgoing this fifth question and as for you all to spend a minute thinking about the victims of this attack, who are listed here. The youngest victims, Kevin "Lee" Gottshall II and Antonio Ansara Cooper Jr, would be 20 years old had they not been killed on that day.

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