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Salt Lake City attorney Jesse Trentadue poses stands in front of the federal court, in Salt Lake City, on Nov. 13, 2014. (Rick Bowmer/AP/Shutterstock)

PREMIUM **US FEATURES**

FBI's Operation to Infiltrate Right-Wing Extremist Groups Lies at Center of Transparency Lawsuit

By [Ken Silva](#) | February 23, 2022 Updated: February 23, 2022

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An [FBI](#) right-wing infiltration operation tangled in allegations of witness tampering, evidence suppression, and connections to the Oklahoma City bombing has been exposed through one man's unprecedented Freedom of Information Act ([FOIA](#)) lawsuit against the U.S. government.

And the case isn't over yet.

Utah attorney Jesse Trentadue's 2006 FOIA lawsuit against the FBI and CIA for Oklahoma City bombing records is indeed still an open matter, having been sealed and litigated behind closed doors since 2015 over witness tampering allegations.

Trentadue's case is unprecedented, according to Judicial Watch. It's rare for a FOIA case to go to trial and even rarer for one to entail allegations as serious as witness tampering, according to Judicial Watch senior investigator Sean Dunagan.

"We're one of the largest FOIA litigants in this country, and we've never been involved in anything that involves that degree of alleged misconduct by the [FBI]," Dunagan said. "It's astounding."

Trentadue declined to comment on the sealed aspects of the case, including when the litigation might conclude. However, he did agree to an interview about the events leading up to 2015. He also provided The Epoch Times with access to a trove of court documents, transcripts, and other records that show details about the federal government's domestic counterterrorism operations.

His records describe an FBI program known as Patriot Conspiracy (PATCON)—a secret operation to infiltrate right-wing and domestic extremist groups.

PATCON has been in the public record for years, described in detail by historian Wendy Painting's 2016 doctoral thesis-turned-book "[Aberration in the Heartland of the Real](#)." But PATCON has received little media attention outside of the [late journalist Will Grigg](#). Other journalists have attempted to cover PATCON, only to run into censorship issues.

The reasons for the alleged attempts to suppress PATCON are clear, according to Trentadue.

"The FBI's real objective in PATCON had been to infiltrate and to incite these fringe groups to violence," he said.

The FBI declined to comment on this story.

The FBI headquarters in Washington on Jan. 2, 2020. (Samira Bouaou/The Epoch Times)

Oklahoma City Mysteries

Trentadue started seeking Oklahoma City bombing records from the FBI in the early 2000s.

The Utah attorney believes that the U.S. government is suppressing surveillance footage of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh with an unidentified accomplice on the morning of April 19, 1995, the day of the bombing. Trentadue also believes that this is connected to his brother's murder.

The reasons for Trentadue's beliefs are complex and have received numerous book-length treatments.

But to summarize, [24 witnesses](#) told the FBI that they saw McVeigh with someone during the morning of the attack—and none were used by the government during the trial. The FBI initially released sketches and appealed to the public for help in finding this mysterious “John Doe #2,” only to later deny that the man ever existed.

Then it was revealed in 2004 that the U.S. Secret Service had conducted its own investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing, separate from the FBI's.

A [Secret Service document](#) on the investigation shocked observers with the following statement: “Security videotapes from the area [around the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building] show the truck detonation three minutes and six seconds after the suspects exited the truck”—supporting suspicions by many that McVeigh indeed had an accomplice and that there exists surveillance footage that confirms this.

The Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in the first seconds of its five-second-implosion in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995. (POOL PHOTO/AFP via Getty Images)

With McVeigh's one known accomplice, Terry Nichols—who's serving life behind bars for providing some assistance to McVeigh—confirmed to have been in Kansas on the day of the bombing, the possible identity of the man seen with McVeigh on April 19, 1995, remains a subject of debate.

Seeking to solve this mystery, Trentadue used the Secret Service memo to help underpin his FOIA lawsuits against the FBI.

For its part, the FBI said the Secret Service's investigation was riddled with errors. While there were video cameras on the Murrah building, they weren't working on the day of the attack, according to the U.S. government.

The Secret Service also walked back its memo, saying that its agents never actually saw any surveillance footage of the Oklahoma City bombing and that some of the conclusions in its investigation were unconfirmed.

Trentadue and the U.S. government argued these points and others for years as their case crawled toward an eventual trial in 2014.

Members of the Secret Service keep an eye on Wall Street in New York on Sept. 6, 2002. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

An Unexpected Call

Leading up to that trial, something unexpected happened in 2011: Trentadue was contacted by a former federal informant named John Matthews.

A retired U.S. Marine, Matthews had worked as a federal asset throughout the 1990s on FBI's PATCON operations. Matthews had been following Trentadue's case and became infuriated when he saw that the FBI had released some records to Trentadue that identified him as an informant.

"All those years, I've been a good boy and kept my mouth shut," Matthews said in 2011, explaining his decision to go public. "Then you [the FBI] release my name? What kind of [expletive] is that?"

Matthews told Trentadue all about PATCON, from selling guns to domestic extremists for FBI sting operations to sitting in on meetings by white supremacists about attacking a nuclear plant in Alabama.

"He told me that he had been told by the FBI that the purpose of PATCON was to infiltrate and to monitor the activities of [the] extreme political right consisting of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and various Neo-Nazi groups, but that he no longer believed what he had been told by the FBI about the purpose of PATCON," Trentadue said in a sworn declaration to the court.

"Mr. Matthews told me that, based upon his experience, he now believed that the FBI's real objective in PATCON had been to infiltrate and to incite these fringe groups to violence."

Matthews's most jolting claim was that he saw McVeigh in 1994 with a German national named Andy Strassmeir—whose name appears in CIA records in relation to the Oklahoma City bombing investigation.

"Mr. Matthews even told me that prior to the Oklahoma City Bombing he had seen Timothy McVeigh and a German National by the name of Andreas Strassmeir at a militia training facility near San Saba, Texas," Trentadue said in his sworn declaration.

“According to Mr. Matthews, he had reported the McVeigh–Strassmeir [sighting] to the FBI, and was told by the FBI that the Bureau was already aware of that fact, which indicated to Mr. Matthews that others within the FBI were monitoring McVeigh on the [run-up] to the attack on the Murrah Building.”

Timothy McVeigh (C) being led from Noble County Courthouse in Perry, Okla., on April 21, 1995. (BOB DAEMMERICH/AFP via Getty Images)

With former Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives informant Carol Howe on the record saying that she [dated Strassmeier](#) in the early '90s, the revelation from Matthews put McVeigh within two degrees of separation from a known federal informant.

Trentadue and his friend Roger Charles—a nationally acclaimed journalist who also worked a brief stint as an investigator on McVeigh's defense team—connected Matthews with journalists at Newsweek to tell his story.

Trentadue and Matthews expected their information would result in a media frenzy that would rock the country. But when Newsweek published its article about Matthews on Nov. 11, 2011, the former informant was dismayed to find the FBI's most damning secrets unreported.

“Mr. Matthews was upset with the Newsweek story,” Trentadue said in a sworn declaration for his FOIA case. “He expressed to me that he felt betrayed because all Newsweek had done was ... expose him to possible retribution from the various groups that he had infiltrated as part of ... PATCON without exposing PATCON.”

Exposing the FBI's wrongdoings through the mainstream media was apparently not an option. However, Trentadue had another idea: for Matthews to testify at his upcoming FOIA trial.

The two agreed: Matthews would help Trentadue make his case in court, while receiving the benefit of being able to tell his story in court without the threat of media censorship.

U.S. Courthouse for the District of Utah. (Swilsonmc/CC BY-SA 3.0)

Trentadue's Trial

The trial of Jesse C. Trentadue v. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, et al. happened in Utah over a four-day period from July 28 to July 31, 2014.

Matthews never testified.

According to Trentadue and Charles, the FBI intimidated Matthews into abandoning his plans to testify.

The Epoch Times interviewed Charles on Feb. 7, before he tragically died a week later.

“John told me he didn’t want to end up another homeless Vietnam veteran,” he said.

With Matthews off the grid, Charles and Trentadue both delivered signed declarations to the court in August 2014.

Charles said he received a phone call on July 30, 2014, the night before Matthews was set to testify.

“John Matthews said that he had been told by the FBI to ‘stand down.’ John Matthews also said that he had been told by the FBI to take a vacation so that he could not be subpoenaed,” Charles said in his Aug. 7, 2014, sworn declaration to the court. “He likewise said that the ‘Bureau’ had made it very clear to him that if he did testify, it could result in the loss of his Veteran’s health coverage, and Veteran’s disability pension.”

Trentadue’s declaration says he spoke with Matthews after his phone call with Charles. The conversation revealed more specifics of the FBI’s coercion tactics against Matthews, according to the Utah attorney’s declaration.

“During that conversation, Mr. Matthews related to me the events leading up to his refusal to testify, including the name of the FBI agent who had contacted him, Adam Quirk,” Trentadue said in his declaration.

“According to Mr. Matthews, FBI Agent Quirk had called him several times, telling him that it would be best for everyone if he did not testify. Agent Quirk told Mr. Matthews to take a vacation so that he could not be subpoenaed, and if he was subpoenaed that Mr. Matthews should answer questions put to him about PATCON with: ‘I don’t recall.’”

The FBI vigorously denied Charles’s and Trentadue’s allegations of witness tampering. The bureau obtained an Aug. 2, 2014, email from Matthews to both parties in the FOIA dispute. In there, Matthews said he declined to testify based on the advice of his friend and former handler, retired FBI agent Don Jarrett.

“Like we both agree, I had nothing to do with the Oklahoma City bombing or the tapes. I did not want to testify and I did not want to get caught in a crossfire with both sides,” Matthews wrote. “If I took a trip, no one could find me to give a subpoena to. Don told me we should inform the FBI in Salt Lake City and let them know what I was going to do.”

An FBI Police car is parked near one of the office buildings in Washington on March 22, 2019. (BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images)

According to Matthews, that's why he was contacted by FBI agent Quirk.

"I told him of what me and Don talked about. He agreed with me that if there was no subpoena, I did not have to show up," Matthews wrote. "It was my understanding that he was going to let the court know I was not showing up."

In his email, Matthews confirmed that he spoke with Trentadue and Charles.

“I told them that I was not going to testify. That Agent Adam Quirk was supposed to [have] told the court,” he wrote. “This is how this mess got started.”

Matthews emphasized in all capital letters: “NO ONE FROM THE FBI OR DOJ HAS MADE ANY THREATS TO ME OR MY FAMILY.”

The FBI also obtained a sworn declaration from Jarrett. According to Jarrett, Matthews called him in July 2014, expressing concerns about testifying for Trentadue.

“I had never heard of the case that Mr. Matthews was describing, and I did not have any idea what Mr. Matthews might be asked to testify about. As far as I am aware, Mr. Matthews would not have any relevant information about the Oklahoma City bombing,” Jarrett wrote. “I suggested to Mr. Matthews that the best thing to do would be to contact the FBI’s attorney handling the case.”

Despite Jarrett’s and Matthews’s denial that the FBI prevented him from testifying, U.S. District Judge Clark Waddoups said he found the witness tampering allegations to be at least plausible.

“The current record at least permits a reasonable inference of wrongdoing by Defendant or its agents in influencing Mr. Matthews not to testify,” he said.

On April 30, 2015, Waddoups appointed a separate magistrate judge—a “special master”—to investigate the witness tampering allegations. The special master was assigned to collect an internal report of the allegations from the FBI, along with copies of all recorded communications between Matthews and the FBI, any reports prepared of interviews with Matthews, and any other records related to the matter.

“The special master shall attend the depositions of Mr. Matthews, Mr. Don Jarrett, agent Quirk (and others, as relevant), as well as [Trentadue and Charles], in which the parties will be able to cross-examine these individuals as to matters relevant to the witness tampering allegations,” Waddoups said.

“Upon the conclusion of his investigation, the special master shall prepare a report and recommendation, including proposed findings of fact and conclusions of law on ... specifically the allegations of the witness tampering involving Mr. Matthews.”

Nearly seven years later, the special master has yet to issue his report and recommendations.

Waddoups is reserving his decision on the July 2014 trial until the witness-tampering matter is resolved. With the court-ordered inquiry taking place behind closed doors, there's no indication of when that may be.

Even if Trentadue wins a judgment in his favor, it isn't clear what the outcome would look like.

He seeks to depose FBI agents and search their physical archives. But the FBI has said in court briefings that the court doesn't have the power to provide the kinds of remedies demanded by Trentadue—suggesting that the bureau would appeal any judgment against it.

Such an appeal could extend the litigation for years.

Dunagan, the senior investigator for Judicial Watch, said he's surprised the case has even gotten this far.

“It's very good for Jesse that his case is not being litigated in D.C. If this case were litigated in D.C., it would have been closed years ago,” he said. “Judges in D.C. have a lot more deference to agencies, particularly when it comes to classification of law enforcement records.”

Matthews didn't respond to multiple requests for comment. Newsweek also didn't respond to requests for comment.

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