

April 19, 1995

The History of the Oklahoma City Bombing

Introduction: Dates that Will Live in Infamy

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt declared it “a date that will live in infamy.” Roosevelt was right; some dates do live on in infamy. No one who has lived through the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001—attacks actually designated by their date—can deny that.

April 19, 1995 was also such a date. At 9:02 a.m. on that day, a truck bomb exploded in front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The blast sheared off the entire front of the nine-story office building and caused a partial collapse. The explosion was so powerful that it also damaged nearly 350 other buildings in downtown Oklahoma City, many of them severely. The bombing killed 168 people, including 19 children, and injured nearly 700 more. It was, and remains, the most lethal single bomb attack on U.S. soil.

What makes the Oklahoma City bombing especially horrific was the identity of its perpetrator. The attack came not from a hostile nation making war on the United States, nor from foreign terrorists beyond America’s shores. Within an hour and a half of the bombing, Timothy McVeigh was in custody and would soon be identified as the main perpetrator. Authorities arrested Terry Nichols soon after, as well as accomplices Michael and Lori Fortier.

These assailants were not foreign terrorists; three of them had even served in the U.S. Army. The perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing and their accomplices were all Americans, born and bred. The hatred that gave rise to this attack was entirely homegrown.

The Oklahoma City bombing, it turns out, was a both symbol and manifestation of a deadly resurgence of the extreme right in the United States – a revival that began in the early-to-mid-1990s and which has had an impact through the present day.

Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the American Extreme Right

McVeigh and his accomplices emerged from the obscurity of the American extreme right, a loose collection of fringe movements and groups held together by shared fear, hatred, anger, and belief in conspiracy theories. Time had passed since its last eruption, in the early 1980s, and the extreme right was ripe for resurgence – if triggers could be found.

The extreme right was in a period of massive upheaval in the early 1990s, though this is more obvious in hindsight than it was at the time. For most of the 20th century, the extreme right consisted of two spheres, each containing a variety of groups, movements and individuals. One sphere consisted of white supremacists, from neo-Nazis to Klansmen to racist skinheads. The other sphere was populated by anti-

Communists and related conspiracy theorists —groups like the John Birch Society or Robert DePugh’s Minutemen. These two spheres overlapped significantly; indeed, for many right-wing extremists, “Jews” and “Communists” were interchangeable terms.

However, the fall of the Soviet bloc and the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s upset this dominant paradigm. The white supremacist sphere remained largely unchanged, but the anti-Communist sphere essentially faded away. It was succeeded by movements and groups who replaced the “global Communist conspiracy” with a much more nebulous conspiracy of tyrannical globalists often referred to as the “New World Order.” They transferred much of their anger from an external foe to an internal foe: the U.S. government. Often collectively known as the “Patriot” movement, these extremists comprised the tax protest movement, the sovereign citizen movement, and the militia movement, with the latter emerging by the end of 1993.

If the collapse of communism served as the backdrop for the extreme right of the 1990s, several more immediate issues triggered its resurgence, including the 1992 election of Bill Clinton and the 1994 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Two gun control measures provided even more energy: the 1993 Brady Law, imposing a waiting period on the purchase of handguns, and the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban, which prohibited many military-style weapons. Anti-government extremists saw these measures as clear steps to the eventual forcible disarming of the American people.

But the most important events behind the upsurge in right-wing violence in the 1990s were the deadly standoffs at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992, and Waco, Texas, in 1993. Both incidents involved confrontations between federal agents and individuals from fringe movements, and in both cases the federal government suffered from deadly lapses of judgment.

The Ruby Ridge standoff took place in August 1992 after a reclusive white supremacist, Randy Weaver, refused to appear for a federal court date on a weapons charge brought by the ATF. U.S. marshals seeking to arrest Weaver unexpectedly encountered him, his 14-year-old son Sammy, and a family friend near the cabin. A confused firefight ensued, killing Sammy and one of the marshals. During the 11-day standoff that followed, an FBI sniper opened fire on family members inside their cabin, wounding two of them and killing Weaver’s unarmed wife, Vicki. Eventually, with the help of third-party negotiators, the standoff ended. Later, in his criminal trial, Randy Weaver was acquitted of all charges except the original failure to appear count. The federal government eventually paid \$3.1 million to the Weaver family to settle a wrongful death lawsuit. Subsequent investigations placed much of the blame for the outcome of the confrontation on the federal agencies involved.

The Ruby Ridge standoff had a major impact on the white supremacist extreme right, who believed that Weaver and his family had been deliberately targeted. However, the Weaver standoff took place in a remote area of northern Idaho, far from the eyes of most media.

The era’s second deadly standoff was a different matter entirely; it took place entirely under the glare of the media spotlight and concluded with a dramatic inferno. On February 28, 1993, ATF agents launched a major raid on a ranch outside of Waco, Texas, housing more than a hundred members of the Branch Davidians, an obscure religious sect with a somewhat violent recent past. The ATF suspected the Davidians, led by the apocalyptic David Koresh, were converting semi-automatic assault rifles to full automatic—a federal weapons violation. The raid, intended to search for such weapons, was poorly planned and executed, resulting in a two-hour-long shootout between ATF agents and armed Branch

Davidians. It is still not entirely clear which party initiated the violence, but by the time the dust cleared, four ATF agents were dead and 16 wounded. Five Branch Davidians also died, with more wounded, while a sixth was fatally shot a few hours later.

The failed raid marked the beginning of a 51-day standoff between the Branch Davidians and the federal government, the latter represented by the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team (which had also taken charge during the Ruby Ridge standoff). During the course of the standoff, federal agents became less interested in the so-far unsuccessful negotiations to end the standoff and more interested in using various forms of pressure (such as causing sleep deprivation or even using force) to resolve it. Some Davidians left during the siege, but most stood by Koresh.

Eventually, the FBI convinced the Clinton administration to approve force to end the standoff. On April 19, 1993, the FBI assaulted the Davidian compound with armored vehicles, punching holes in buildings and firing tear gas. The FBI called on the Davidians to surrender, to no effect. After some hours, fires broke out in the building where the Davidians were holed up, fires that quickly spread and became deadly. The available evidence points towards the Davidians having probably started the fires. What is certain is that a relative few Davidians survived the fire, while 76 perished—including a large number of infants and children. The federal government subsequently brought charges, including conspiracy to commit murder, against 12 surviving Davidians. Four were acquitted of all charges, while the remaining eight were acquitted of the murder conspiracy allegations but convicted on lesser charges.

The standoff at Waco and its bloody end was shown on national television, causing great controversy. While most mainstream Americans tended to blame Koresh for the outcome of the siege, or to view the ending primarily as a tragic outcome, the extreme right attached an entirely different meaning to the standoff: to them, it was a clear example of the federal government deliberately massacring people (including children) in cold blood merely because they were "different." First it was Randy Weaver and his family, then it was the Branch Davidians—anybody could be next. The government had clearly become the enemy.

Together, Ruby Ridge and Waco were a "one-two" punch that galvanized the extreme right and brought in new converts. In fact, it is clear that the emergence of the militia movement was directly related to these two standoffs. A number of the early promoters of the militia movement, including Linda Thompson and John Trochmann, actually had direct ties to one or other of the standoffs. The Waco standoff, in particular, became powerful propaganda in the hands of the militia movement, which began in late 1993 and spread quickly. But even before the siege ended, many right-wing extremists had identified Waco as a cause de guerre. Quite a few extremists showed up at Waco to protest against the government and voice support for the Davidians.

One of them was Timothy McVeigh.

Timothy McVeigh: The Making of a Terrorist

Though Terry Nichols took part in the Oklahoma City bombing and the Fortiers were accomplices, the story of the Oklahoma City bombing is really the story of Timothy McVeigh, whose last name is now equivalent with Oswald, Manson, and bin Laden in terms of notoriety.

Timothy McVeigh was born in April 1968 in Lockport, New York. His parents were not extremists; his childhood was unremarkable. He had his first exposure to the extreme right in the 1980s, when he developed an interest in survivalism (the 1980s equivalent of today's "prepper" movement) and ordered fringe books he found advertised in the backs of gun and sporting magazines. Among these was *The Turner Diaries*, a novel written by William Pierce, leader of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, which depicts a future white revolution. The novel has influenced many violent white supremacists since the 1980s, though McVeigh later claimed that the white supremacist aspect of the book was not what interested him.

After spending time as an armored car driver, McVeigh joined the Army in 1988. Some people would later claim that McVeigh got his extremist views while in the Army, essentially accusing the military of radicalizing him, but he had already started to lean to the extreme right. The military did not create McVeigh the terrorist, but it did introduce him to the people who would later help him commit his infamous act. During a stint at Fort Benning, Georgia, McVeigh became friends with an older soldier, Terry Nichols. Later, he met Michael Fortier at Fort Riley, Kansas.

While McVeigh pursued his military career, he kept up his self-education in the literature of the extreme right—especially anti-government conspiracy theories. He also passed around copies of *The Turner Diaries* to other soldiers. In 1991, McVeigh fought in the Gulf War and later tried but failed to get into the Special Forces, a failure that reduced his enthusiasm for military service.

McVeigh left the Army by the end of 1991 after five years of service, returning to Lockport but finding only boring, menial jobs awaiting him. His personal and ideological discontent bubbled to the surface in early 1992 when he wrote a disjointed, angry letter to the local newspaper claiming that "America is in serious decline." Already, McVeigh could at least contemplate the possibility of future violence, asking "Is a civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system? I hope it doesn't come to that, but it might." The standoff at Ruby Ridge that summer sharpened McVeigh's negative view of the government.

In early 1993, McVeigh left New York for Florida, beginning a two-year period of peripatetic wandering. That same month, the ATF launched its raid on the Davidian compound in Waco. The Davidian siege grabbed McVeigh's attention as nothing else had and, as the siege went on, McVeigh decided to go to Waco, where he spent several days handing out right-wing literature and bumper stickers. When a student reporter in Waco interviewed McVeigh, he expressed his fear of and anger towards the government, stating that people needed to defend themselves against "government control."

McVeigh left Waco before the standoff's end. In April 1993, McVeigh drove to Michigan to reconnect with Terry Nichols, who had also journeyed into right-wing extremism, egged on by his older brother James, who was involved in the sovereign citizen movement. Adherents of this movement believe that a long-ago conspiracy took over the legitimate government and slowly replaced it with a tyrannical, illegitimate "de facto" government. They claim that the illegitimate government has no authority or jurisdiction over them.

On April 19, 1993, McVeigh and Nichols watched on television as the FBI assaulted the Davidian compound. From that point on, Waco became an obsession for McVeigh, who mentioned it at every opportunity. He repeatedly watched *Waco: The Big Lie*, a conspiratorial videotape produced by militia movement pioneer Linda Thompson, an Indianapolis lawyer. Eventually, McVeigh began to sell his own Waco-themed videos and pamphlets at the gun shows he routinely attended.

The Plot is Launched

As angry as McVeigh was over Waco, he does not appear to have immediately contemplated retaliatory violence. Instead, he continued to travel the gun show circuit and to visit with friends for a year. But the prospect of violence was certainly on his mind, and in the summer of 1994 he wrote a friend that “blood will flow in the streets.”

By the fall, McVeigh would later tell an interviewer, he had decided to take some sort of violent retaliatory action against the government, though he did not yet know what it would be. Terry Nichols was involved even in this very early stage. In the fall of 1994, they stole 500 blasting caps, as well as ignition cord, from a quarry in Kansas near where Nichols lived at the time. They had already begun purchasing ammonium nitrate, with the idea of selling it at gun shows, but now their purchases increased. McVeigh eventually decided he would combine ammonium nitrate with nitromethane to make a powerful explosive.

Eventually, McVeigh, back in Arizona, told Michael and Lori Fortier that he intended to make a truck bomb— which he would use to attack the Murrah Federal Building on the anniversary of the last day of the Waco standoff. Without providing specifics, McVeigh also told his younger sister, Jennifer, who sympathized with some of his views at the time, that he had passed from the “propaganda stage” into the “action stage.” He also said that he would “go afoul of the law in a big way.” According to his biographer, McVeigh settled on the Murrah Building as his target because it housed the offices of several federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI and ATF. McVeigh and Michael Fortier cased federal buildings in various cities, including Phoenix, Tucson, and Kansas City. McVeigh said he wanted to target a building susceptible to damage in hopes of killing as many federal employees as possible.

By November 1994, as McVeigh started designing his bomb, Terry Nichols secured the needed funds, travelling to Arkansas to rob a gun dealer McVeigh knew, stealing an estimated \$60,000 in cash and goods. His accomplices were helpful, up to a point: in early 1995, McVeigh and Michael Fortier drove to Oklahoma City to case the Murrah building and to find a spot for a getaway vehicle. Lori Fortier helped McVeigh create a fake driver’s license. But when McVeigh asked Michael Fortier to help him mix the chemicals to construct the bomb, Fortier refused.

As April began, McVeigh was in the home stretch of his deadly plot. One remaining issue was what to do after the bombing. McVeigh made half-hearted attempts to reach out to other extremists, seeking a “safe haven,” but with no success. He would have to improvise. Undaunted, McVeigh travelled to Kansas, where he rented a 20-foot truck he would use in the bombing and rendezvoused with the now somewhat reluctant Terry Nichols. McVeigh had to put pressure on Nichols to help him in this final stage. The two drove down to Oklahoma City, where McVeigh stashed the getaway vehicle he had purchased, then back to Kansas.

On April 18, McVeigh and Nichols turned the rental truck into a rental truck bomb, mixing nitromethane and ammonium nitrate in 55-gallon drums—some five thousand pounds or so of explosives—inside the truck. McVeigh then constructed an ignition system with the blasting caps. The massive bomb completed, McVeigh left Nichols behind and drove to Oklahoma. Though the Fortiers and Nichols had all aided the conspiracy, this was McVeigh's plan -- and it would be McVeigh alone who would detonate the bomb the next day.

The Bombing and its Aftermath

On April 19, McVeigh drove his rental truck into Oklahoma City, stopping briefly as he approached his target to light a fuse. He pulled up in front of the Murrah Building, got out and walked to his getaway vehicle. Before he reached his vehicle, at 9:02am, the bomb went off.

The force of the explosion buckled the front of the Murrah Building, snapping a number of support columns and exposing its ragged innards. Some victims in the Murrah building fell five or six floors to their deaths as the structure partially pancaked. The building's day care center, located on the second floor, fell down to the first floor. The bodies— and body parts—of children seemed to be everywhere.

The blast blew off roofs and fronts of buildings across the street, killing several people in those structures. A number of downtown buildings nearly collapsed from the magnitude of the explosion. Hundreds more were damaged. A massive crater opened on the street in front of the Murrah building, surrounded by a tremendous amount of debris and a crowd of shocked, injured, and dying people.

First responders—police, firefighters, citizens—rushed to the scene, extracting bodies—some living, many not—from the rubble, giving first aid, and guiding the dazed, bloody and traumatized survivors to safety. With the Murrah Building still unstable and collapsing, several first responders were injured.

Of the many hundreds of victims, one in particular symbolized the enormity of the crime perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh. An Oklahoma City Police Department sergeant, John Avera, discovered an infant girl under the rubble. Avera carefully extracted the heavily injured girl, Baylee Almon, who had turned a year old only the day before, but could not save her. He gave her body to a fireman, Captain Chris Fields, who cradled Baylee gently. Two amateur photographers captured the heartbreaking scene on film, immortalizing Baylee, whose tragic, pointless death became the unintentional symbol of a nation's agony.

Timothy McVeigh, meanwhile, left the city in his getaway car, but he did not get far. A little over an hour later, Charles Hanger, an Oklahoma Highway Patrol officer, pulled McVeigh over because his recently-purchased car was missing its license plate. Hanger had no idea who McVeigh was or what he had done, but when he discovered McVeigh had a concealed handgun, he arrested McVeigh.

It would take a couple of days before authorities would realize who they had in custody. By then one of the largest law enforcement investigations in the history of the United States was already in full-swing. The FBI ended up interviewing thousands of witnesses and potential witnesses. But the evidence led them quickly to McVeigh, then to Nichols and the Fortiers.

The chaos of the early hours and days after the bombing, combined with conflicting witness reports and early misstatements by officials and the media, quickly became the foundation of conspiracy theories.

Such theories were an inevitable byproduct of the bombing, as many people have difficulty accepting simple explanations for major acts of violence such as assassinations and terrorist attacks. Several witnesses reported seeing two men, not one; hence the infamous police sketch of a “John Doe #2” that helped give rise to conspiracy theories.

The many (though slight) connections that McVeigh had to a variety of extremists and extremist groups also provided fuel for the fire. Some conspiracy theories would point to shadowy right-wing co-conspirators. Others, even more far-fetched, posited that Islamic extremists were actually somehow behind the bombing.

Right-wing extremists themselves, however, naturally suspicious of the government and wanting to distance themselves from McVeigh and his act, proposed what became the dominant Oklahoma City bombing conspiracy theory: that the federal government had bombed its own building in a “false flag” operation using McVeigh as a patsy to create an excuse for going after right-wing “dissidents.”

Eventually, a cottage industry of conspiracy theorists would emerge from the ashes of Oklahoma City, fueled by everyone from small town reporters to radio talk show hosts to state legislators. Their ideas would dominate the conspiracy theory landscape until 2001, when the 9/11 terrorist attacks sparked even grander conspiracy theories.

In the real world, justice took its course. McVeigh faced a judge and jury in Colorado in 1997. Among the witnesses testifying against him were Michael and Lori Fortier, as well as his sister Jennifer. The Fortiers took plea deals in exchange for their testimony, with Michael receiving a 12-year federal prison sentence and Lori given immunity from prosecution. Jennifer McVeigh, under threat of a charge of having mailed ammunition to her brother, testified to her knowledge of McVeigh’s plans in exchange for immunity. In June 1997, the jury found Timothy McVeigh guilty of 11 counts of murder and conspiracy, sentencing him to death. McVeigh was finally executed in 2001—the first execution carried out by the federal government in decades.

McVeigh’s co-conspirator Terry Nichols also went to court in 1997, where a jury convicted him of conspiring to build a weapon of mass destruction as well as eight counts of involuntary manslaughter of federal employees. He received a sentence of life without parole. In 2004, Nichols was tried a second time on state charges by Oklahoma prosecutors seeking a death penalty on murder charges. The jury found Nichols guilty but deadlocked on the death sentence, recommending multiple additional life sentences instead.

One other, though short-term, consequence of the Oklahoma City bombing was a raised awareness of the danger of violent attacks coming from America’s extreme right, from hate crimes to terrorism. In the wake of McVeigh’s attack, the FBI and other agencies put more effort into fighting domestic terrorism, and this effort did have some effect. After 1995, law enforcement successfully derailed scores of right-wing terrorist plots and conspiracies in the United States. While right-wing violence never ceased being a significant problem, no attacks have come close to reaching the scale of death and destruction that happened on April 19, 1995, in Oklahoma City. There has been no sequel to the bombing.

Just six years after the Oklahoma City bombing, a very different group of terrorists committed the 9/11 terror attacks, which caused death and destruction on a scale that far surpassed that of the Oklahoma City bombing. The attacks of September 11, 2001, rightly drew the attention of government and law



enforcement to the threats of international and domestic terrorism with ties to radical Islam. But the 9/11 attacks also served to cloud the threat of violence from the extreme right—even though such violence still occurred with regularity in the years after 2001. This would have consequences beginning in 2009, when the extreme right in the United States underwent a resurgence of activity and violence.