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Timothy James McVeigh

Biography in Context, March 1, 1999



Born: April 23, 1968 in United States, Lockport, New York
Died: June 11, 2001 in United States, Indiana, Terre Haute
Nationality: American
Occupation: Terrorist
Military/Wartime Service: Combat Infantry Badge, 1991, for military service in Gulf War. Bronze Star, 1991, for military service in Gulf War.

On April 19, 1995, an explosion in downtown Oklahoma City destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Building, a nine-story structure that housed offices of the federal government. The blast, which was felt as far as 80 miles away, killed 168 people (including 19 children), injured over 500 more, and destroyed or damaged 300 other buildings in the vicinity. It was the most devastating terrorist act in U.S. history--in a city small enough that everyone would know at least one of the dead. The man captured, found guilty, and sentenced to death for the act was Timothy J. McVeigh.

A Quiet Boy

Those who look for the causes of horrendous acts of adults in traumatic childhood events have been somewhat disappointed by accounts of McVeigh's early life. His upbringing in the small town of Pendleton, New York, though troubled, was not extraordinary. He was born in 1968, the second of three children. The marriage between his father, a "loyal union man" who worked nights at an automotive plant, and his restless mother was not a happy one. Young Timothy was quiet and withdrawn--few of his former high school teachers remembered him as a student. During his senior year, however, his standardized test scores earned him a State Regents scholarship. Rather than attend college, at 18 years of age he enrolled in a computer school in nearby Buffalo, New York, only to drop out after just three and a half months. Earlier that year, his mother had left the family and would have very little contact with her children and their father over the next decade. McVeigh remained a quiet, introverted person into adulthood and rarely spoke of his feelings toward his family. His friends, however, surmised that while he was very attached to his younger sister Jennifer, McVeigh seemed to harbor a significant resentment toward his mother.

Army Life

For about two years after dropping out of school, McVeigh worked a series of odd jobs, including a stint as a security guard, during which he startled some of his colleagues by waving a large pistol out his car window and showing up for work wearing crossed bandoleers of ammunition. In May 1988, perhaps spurred by a growing interest in weapons and a need for order in his life, McVeigh enlisted in the United States Army. In basic training, he met and befriended recruit platoon leader Terry Nichols, who would later be indicted with McVeigh as a co-conspirator in the bombing of the Murrah Building. Former army associates spoke of both men as having been very attentive to the details of army life: relishing the duties of polishing their boots, keeping their uniforms immaculately pressed, and cleaning the company commander's vehicle. McVeigh was also seen as a loner who rarely spoke of his personal life, had never had a girlfriend, and devoted his spare time to target practice and reading gun magazines.

At first, McVeigh functioned well in the structured environment of army life and was promoted to the rank of sergeant, while those with whom he'd enlisted were still privates. For his service with the First Division in the Persian Gulf War, he was awarded a Combat Infantry Badge and a Bronze Star. He was unsuccessful, however, in his attempt to join the elite corps of the Green Berets. In April, 1991, he went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for the 21-day assessment and selection course, but "washed out" after the first day.

His disappointment at Fort Bragg seems to have been a turning point for McVeigh, who sought a discharge and returned home before his army re-enlistment period ended. Whereas his former co-workers from before his army

stint remembered McVeigh as looking "like Rambo," his supervisor at the security firm he worked for after the army recalled most vividly his thinness and bad posture. She felt she could only trust him posted "at the back door"-due to his lack of initiative and tendency to become too aggressive when people were uncooperative. By 1993 McVeigh had moved to Kingman, Arizona, where his army friend Michael Fortier resided. Living for brief periods at various addresses, McVeigh seemed to become increasingly isolated, obsessed with guns and immersed in the subculture of right-wing extremism.

Extremist Interests

During this period, McVeigh developed a fascination for the ideology of paramilitary groups, whose numbers were growing throughout the United States. In addition to gun magazines like *Soldier of Fortune* and *Guns & Ammo*, McVeigh started reading newsletters like that of the overtly anti-semitic Liberty Lobby and Christian Identity's *The Patriot Report* (which later printed the view that the Oklahoma City bombing was actually a plot by "the real hate groups," namely the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, to crack down on paramilitary groups). McVeigh also apparently became obsessed with various novels and films that featured such themes as the lone soldier betrayed by his corrupt government (the "Rambo genre"), or apocalypse survivors left to rely solely on their wits and salvaged weapons. His favorite movie was *Red Dawn*, a 1984 film about a group of small-town teenagers who engage in guerilla warfare against invading Soviet troops. Another favorite was the novel *The Turner Diaries*, which was widely disseminated over the Internet among paramilitary groups. Written by an American Nazi Party official, the story features a hero who packs a truck with a bomb made of fertilizer and fuel oil and then detonates it at FBI headquarters.

Common to these works was the theme of revolution against a government that would deprive private citizens of their right to own guns and protect themselves. As McVeigh became more deeply absorbed in the anti-government, anti-social culture of the far right, several events between 1992 and 1994 gave further impetus to the paramilitary movement. Many right-wing dissidents were angered by the passage of legislation restricting the purchase of firearms and by two highly publicized incidents in which federal law enforcement used deadly force against United States citizens. The first was at white supremacist Randy Weaver's cabin in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, on August 22, 1992; the second, at the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993.

April 19, 1995

At just after 9:00 in the morning two years to the day after the Waco standoff, a terrible explosion in Oklahoma City not only devastated a federal office building and shattered the lives of hundreds of people living in that city, but also undermined an entire nation's sense of security. Initial televised reports aired a theory that foreign terrorists were responsible and suggested that eyewitnesses had seen Middle Eastern-looking men fleeing the scene. Remarkably, however, Timothy McVeigh was in police custody within 75 minutes after the blast. Some sixty miles from Oklahoma City, a state trooper happened to stop McVeigh's car on the highway because the license plate was missing and then made an arrest when he determined that McVeigh was carrying a concealed firearm. The T-shirt McVeigh was wearing quoted Thomas Jefferson: "The Tree of Liberty must from time to time be refreshed with the blood of patriots and tyrants."

Back at the explosion site, meanwhile, investigators got a lucky break when they found the rear axle of a Ryder truck which they believe was used in the bombing. Using the vehicle's serial number, the truck rental was traced to a lot in Junction City, Kansas, where the rental agent worked with a police sketch artist to create a likeness of the man who had signed for the vehicle. McVeigh's resemblance to the drawing released by investigators first caused attention to be focused on him as a suspect in the bombing. It was later contended that McVeigh and his army friend, Terry Nichols, had stolen dynamite from a quarry in Kansas, used false names to purchase 4,800 pounds of ammonium nitrate and rent storage lockers (a fingerprint was left on a receipt), and robbed an Arkansas gun dealer at gunpoint.

A Trial Before the Nation

After almost two years of investigation, jury selection for Timothy McVeigh's trial began on March 31, 1997. Due to the tremendous amount of pre-trial publicity, the proceedings were moved to Denver, Colorado. Despite some apparent controversies that surfaced, McVeigh's trial, presided over by judge Richard Matsch, lasted only two months. Nearly half that time was taken in jury selection, for which 99 interviews were conducted out of a potential pool of 1000 people. On June 2, after 23 1/2 hours of deliberations, the jury found McVeigh guilty of all eleven charges he faced, which included conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, the use of a weapon of mass destruction, destruction by explosive, and first degree murder of eight federal law enforcement agents. Eleven days later, after listening to testimony from members of McVeigh's family and from relatives of those who died in the explosion, the same jury sentenced McVeigh to death by lethal injection. Chief Prosecutor Joseph Hartzler was greeted by a spirited ovation from a crowd gathered outside the courthouse as he left.

Despite the apparent finality of the jury's decision, aspects of the case remain unresolved to some, who believe that more people must have been included in the plot to bomb the Murrah Building. In June, 1997, at the request of Oklahoma Representative Charles Key and Glenn Wilburn, an accountant who lost two grandsons in the blast,

a Grand Jury was charged with investigating the possibility that a wider conspiracy was involved. In any case, McVeigh's case is expected to stay before the courts for some time, though McVeigh himself has stated that he doubts any of his legal appeals will succeed.

Most Americans reacted to news of the bombing by asking themselves what sort of person would commit such an act and why. McVeigh's face, nearly expressionless even at sentencing, gave them nothing. In the aftermath of the tragedy in Oklahoma City, a \$24 million memorial is currently being erected on the site where the Murrah Building used to stand, and security has been tightened at federal buildings across the United States. Though Timothy McVeigh is behind bars, many are left wondering whether others who share his extremist ideology might perpetrate similar acts of terrorism in the future.

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