



## **Timothy McVeigh: Portrait of a Political Mass Murderer**

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### Abstract:

The 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City demolished one-third of the building, killing 168 people, including 19 children, and injured 684 others – the worst act of domestic terrorism in American history. The bomb was placed by Timothy McVeigh who intended it to provoke a right-wing rising as a declaration of war against the Federal government. McVeigh, who made little effort to avoid detection, was found guilty and duly executed after a relatively short time of six years. McVeigh, coming from an unsettled but not traumatising upbringing, developed an early obsession with guns which progressed to the extreme right-wing survivalist movement. He had a good military career and was decorated in the first Gulf War but became disillusioned after failing to get into Special Forces. Drifting around gun shows, becoming more extreme, the tipping point was the deaths of white supremacist Randy Weaver's wife and son at their home in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas. McVeigh decided that these events justified going to war against the Federal

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# Timothy McVeigh: Portrait of a Political Mass Murderer

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## Abstract

The 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City demolished one-third of the building, killing 168 people, including 19 children, and injured 684 others – the worst act of domestic terrorism in American history. The bomb was placed by Timothy McVeigh who intended it to provoke a right-wing rising as a declaration of war against the Federal government. McVeigh, who made little effort to avoid detection, was found guilty and duly executed after a relatively short time of six years.

McVeigh, coming from an unsettled but not traumatising upbringing, developed an early obsession with guns which progressed to the extreme right-wing survivalist movement. He had a good military career and was decorated in the first Gulf War but became disillusioned after failing to get into Special Forces.

Drifting around gun shows, becoming more extreme, the tipping point was the deaths of white supremacist Randy Weaver's wife and son at their home in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas. McVeigh decided that these events justified going to war against the Federal government and, aided by Terry Nichols, made elaborate efforts to acquire large amounts of ammonium nitrate, racing fuel and dynamite.

McVeigh intended to be a martyr for his cause. The war against the government he had hoped for did not occur but there was a steady increase in right-wing activities culminating in the Trump-inspired 6 January insurrection against the Capitol. McVeigh shares characteristics with other such mass murderers and these issues are examined in the article.



## The Bombing

On 19<sup>th</sup> April 1995 a huge bomb in a truck parked outside demolished one-third of the building, killing 168 people, including 19 children, and injuring 684 others – the worst act of domestic terrorism in American history. The bomb was placed by Timothy McVeigh who intended it to provoke a right-wing rising as a declaration of war against the Federal government. It was also revenge for the deaths at Ruby Ridge and Waco (the date chosen for the bombing was the second anniversary of Waco and the 1775 American Revolution, in Lexington).

The bombing required extensive planning in which he was assisted by Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier.<sup>1</sup> They had helped him collect the material to assemble the bomb and case the area for a parking place in the front of the building. Neither Nichols nor Fortier were present on the day the bomb was set off by McVeigh.

Soon apprehended, the prosecution was headed by Merrick Garland who was to surface later in prosecutions over the 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021 Congress invasion. McVeigh's attitude during the trial was disconcerting to the families and friends of the victims. He did not give evidence, seemed quite at ease and had no response when the victim impacts statement was read out.

McVeigh, convicted on 11 counts of murder and conspiracy, was sentenced to death. Nichols got life imprisonment and Fortier, who turned in evidence for the prosecution, twelve years.

Until his death, McVeigh showed no remorse, boasting about delaying his bomb till 9 a.m. to get as many victims as possible. He dismissed the 19 children who were killed as “collateral damage” in his war against the federal government.<sup>2</sup> On 11 June 2001 he was executed.

Who was this man and what drove him?

## The Bomber

Timothy McVeigh (born 23 April 1968) came from a working-class background in upstate rustbelt New York. His father and grandfather had factory jobs, and his father faced increasing insecurity about keeping his position in later years. The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/oklahoma-city-bombing>. Accessed 22 August 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing (pp. 218-219). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.



parents were mismatched. His mother was educated, and worked as a travel agent, going on frequent trips and distancing herself from her partner. When they finally parted she took her daughter with her. For her son this was a shattering betrayal for which he never forgave her, always referring to her in derogatory terms. It is reported that he withdrew into comic books and hero fantasies.

At school, despite an IQ in the superior range, his grades were low and his major achievement was computer hacking (an ominous sign?). He became an Eagle Scout, perhaps a prelude to his military career. He was described as shy and uncommunicative by his schoolmates. During his teens his grandfather encouraged his interest in guns which became a consuming obsession, steadily escalating in his adult years. He became immersed in the gun lobby and readily adopted the survivalist right-wing ideology they espoused. He stored barrels of water in his family's basement in case of nuclear war. *Soldier of Fortune* magazine was required reading and joining the National Rifle Association was inevitable; the Republican Party, however, was far too centrist for him.

The greatest influence on his thinking was the *Mein Kampf* of the extreme right-wing movement: *The Turner Diaries*, a badly written novel – really an offensive and racist white supremacist polemic – by William Luther Pierce (published under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald) in which the hero Earl Turner, a gun enthusiast, responded to firearms laws by making a truck bomb and destroying the FBI headquarters in Washington.<sup>3</sup> *The Turner Diaries* became McVeigh's bible, he always carried a well-thumbed copy and sold the books at gun shows. There is little doubt that this became the template for the Murrah Building bombing.

Graduating from high school in 1986 he worked as a security guard before joining the Army in 1988. The army was made for McVeigh. A star recruit, he received rapid promotion to sergeant and was considered likely to go high places in the service. He was meticulous in maintaining military discipline and neatness, assiduous in any tasks he was required to do and held up as a model to the other recruits.<sup>4</sup> His skills in marksmanship were soon noted.

The military environment was hardly liberal. A lot of soldiers were racist, sexist and obsessed with guns. McVeigh came to the military with an inclination toward white

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<sup>3</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (p. 55). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (p. 75). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.



supremacy, right-wing fanaticism, and vigilante violence. With him in the unit were brothers James and Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier whose pronounced right-wing views facilitated his extremism. He now added distasteful racism to his splenetic discourse.

McVeigh received training as a tank gunner and passed tests to qualify for the elite Special Forces (Green Berets). The first Gulf War loomed so he deferred the application and went to Kuwait.

McVeigh had a good war. He was the rocket operator in a Bradley armoured vehicle, receiving a medal for demolishing a machine gun post. The question was later raised whether he had Post-traumatic Stress Disorder from his experiences in the war. He was scarcely under fire or in danger but said he was upset by the masses of Iraqi bodies as they approached Kuwait. He was regarded as a hero and the tour was the highlight of his military career, if not his life, so PTSD seems unlikely.

This was followed by a failure that changed the path of his life. Jetlagged and unfit after long flights home, he flunked out after two days of the trial to join the Special Forces. This was significant; he did not consider reapplying when he was fitter and seemed unable to process this single failure that was to haunt him.

McVeigh returned to his unit. Here he did not relate to the newer recruits who lacked the application on which he prided himself and resigned after six months with an honourable discharge in December 1991.

Now followed an empty period when he worked intermittently as a security guard, drifting around the country to gun shows where he would sell *The Turner Diaries* and talk guns and extremist fantasies to anyone he could find.<sup>5</sup> He immersed himself in the conspiracy theories that the federal government was planning to take away individual liberties, such as the right to own guns. McVeigh took this to extremes: the government was a fascist conspiracy to control the citizens and to be fought on the basis of the Second Amendment which allowed militias to take up arms to defend themselves. This overlooked that the amendment was intended for external invaders, not the elected government. He quit the National Rifle Association as too weak on gun rights and began to describe himself as 'the ultimate warrior'.

For the next three years, McVeigh drifted from state to state linking up with like-minded survivalists, gun-lovers and federal-government-haters. He started

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<sup>5</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (p. 139). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.



listening to Rush Limbaugh who did not hold back in his inflammatory attacks on the federal government. He was incensed when the Clinton administration – already high on the hate list for right-wingers – recommended new gun laws and was reputed to be planning to raid gun owners and members of the Patriot community in the spring of 1995. Enraged to learn that he had been overpaid while in the Army, he wrote back: “Go ahead, take everything I own; take my dignity. Feel good as you grow fat and rich at my expense; sucking my tax dollars and property”. He began looking for a state with low taxes so that he could live without heavy government regulation or high taxes.

The drastic steps McVeigh was to take crystallised with two events equated with martyrdom by the extremists: the deaths of white supremacist Randy Weaver’s wife and son in a 1992 confrontation at their home in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and the 1993 siege of the Branch Davidians’ compound in Waco, Texas, that resulted in the deaths of 82 cult members (ignoring the deaths of six Alcohol, Fire and Tobacco agents).

These events removed any restraint that he could have about attacking the Federal government. During the 51-day standoff, McVeigh travelled to Waco, parking his car as close as he was allowed and offering to sell his right-wing literature to anyone who stopped to talk to him. Learning of the fiery holocaust that ended the siege convinced him that the time for passivity was over; the only option now was war and from this point, he began to plan the bombing.

The Alfred P. Murrah Building was deliberately chosen because of its location in the Mid-West, away from the big cities. McVeigh recruited Terry Nichols, his closest friend, to help him collect the huge amounts of ammonium nitrate, racing fuel and gelignite to make the bomb. Fortier, addicted to meth, was also involved although in the end, he withdrew from the project. It is a depressing fact that as he faced his doubts about going ahead, one phone call to the authorities could have prevented the tragedy.<sup>6</sup>

McVeigh and Nichols made token attempts to hide their identities but used a traceable phone card when acquiring the bomb materials. McVeigh then used his own name several times, making it easy to track him later. The getaway car he drove after the bombing was missing a number plate, a near-certainty to be noticed by

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<sup>6</sup> Toobin, Jeffrey. *Homegrown: Timothy McVeigh and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism* (p. 252). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.



highway patrol which is what led to his apprehension and arrest. Was this mere carelessness or the belief that he needed to be caught?

Once apprehended, McVeigh accepted that he was to be executed, which he referred to as “federally assisted suicide”. The appeals against his execution could have gone on for decades but in 2001 he refused to take this further and was duly executed. His statement, frequently reiterated, was that death was an expected hazard for a soldier at war; McVeigh, in short, effectively committed suicide to become a political martyr.<sup>7</sup>

What of his political goals did he accomplish? His short-term goal failed completely. Such was the horror at the casualties in the immediate aftermath that no one on the right wing was prepared to do more than express regret over what happened. The bombing failed to provoke the full-scale war against the government that McVeigh had hoped for.

In the long term, McVeigh was more successful than realised at the time. A steady uptick in extreme right-wing activities, facilitated by the exponential growth of the internet, culminated in the rise of Donald Trump with its apotheosis in the January 6<sup>th</sup> invasion of the House of Congress.<sup>8</sup>

## Discussion

Inevitably, the question arose of his psychiatric status. Psychiatrist Dr John Smith had one examination with McVeigh. Smith’s view was that McVeigh was not deranged but ‘was overly sensitive, to the point of being a little paranoid, about the actions of the government. He committed the act mostly out of revenge because of the Waco assault, but he also wanted to make a political statement about the role of the federal government and protest the use of force against the citizens. So (the bombing) was a conscious choice on his part, not because he was deranged, but because he was serious.

Meloy makes a distinction between affective aggression and predatory aggression (see Appendix) in murderers.<sup>9</sup> His study of Mohammad Atta (leader of the 9/11

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<sup>7</sup> Toobin, Jeffrey. *Homegrown: Timothy McVeigh and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism* (p. 121). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition. got in his way.

<sup>8</sup> Ted Kaczynski, AKA the Unabomber, started his bombing activities in the seventies and was apprehended in 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Meloy JR. Indirect Personality Assessment of the Violent True Believer. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 82(2), 138–146.



terrorists) and McVeigh showed that both men experienced a conversion to and identified with an extremist movement that espoused absolutist beliefs, derogated critical thought, and blamed an external object for all their troubles. Both men were described by friends and associates as increasingly intense, humourless, angry, ideologically rigid, dogmatic, and strident during the 2-year incubation period before their acts.

Melow describes McVeigh as a poised, overcontrolled individual who presented very well to the outside world. He was self-sufficient, self-reliant and capable of organizing and moving effectively toward his own goals. He was mildly shy, sensitive, and serious, gravitating toward esoteric political and philosophical beliefs. These ideas helped him justify his sense of being different from, and superior to others and defended against underlying feelings of inadequacy, dependency, and anger toward authority figures whom he believed were arbitrary and unreasonable. McVeigh was also brooding, analytical, and introspective. He would intellectualize his anger and other feelings rather than express them directly.

This assessment is similar to the findings of other political mass murderers. Norwegian Anders Breivik who killed 78 people, mostly adolescents, compiled a compendium of texts entitled *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, describing his opposition to Islam, blaming feminism for European "cultural suicide" and calling for the deportation of Muslims from Europe.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of the attack was to save Norway and Western Europe from a Muslim takeover and the Labour Party had to "pay the price for letting down Norway and the Norwegian people". Breivik was an isolated figure who lived with his mother and was regarded by people who knew him as odd.

Such was the controversy over Breivik's mental state that he had two lengthy psychiatric examinations by four psychiatrists.<sup>11</sup> The initial diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia was overturned by the second set of examiners who found that he was not psychotic, but had antisocial tendencies, and severe grandiosity with a narcissistic personality disorder combined with pseudologia fantastica (pathological lying). These findings in turn set off a whirlwind of public and legal speculation about Breivik's condition. Like Breivik, McVeigh refused to allow his lawyers to use a

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-14267007>. Accessed 22 August 2023.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed description of the examination findings, see Melle I. The Breivik case and what psychiatrists can learn from it. *World Psychiatry*. 2013 Feb;12(1):16-21.





psychiatric defence. To be let off on mental grounds would have destroyed his intended martyr status.

McVeigh, Atta and Breivik present a recurrent forensic dilemma: extreme ideas leading to murderous criminal behaviours that are foreign to the thinking of the average person. Does this mean that they were delusional? Rahman *et al* hold that the concept of extremely overvalued beliefs constitutes rigidly held non-delusional beliefs, not a psychotic condition and this is the most likely explanation.<sup>12</sup>

McVeigh joins the ranks of history's political mass murderers, many of whom have similar characteristics. He shares some characteristics with Hitler although there is no comparison with the latter's crimes. Hitler loathed his strict, distant father; he adored his mother and was shattered by her death. This would be the precise opposite of McVeigh's situation but the same dynamic. McVeigh was close to his father (and especially his grandfather) while he detested his mother for leaving, an event that devastated him. Both, despite obvious intelligence, made little of their schooling but flourished in their military careers. Their dealing with failure was remarkably similar. Hitler failed his application to study fine art and architecture. He made no further effort to get accepted and complained about academics for the rest of his life. McVeigh had the same response to his failure in the Special Forces trial. He could easily have reapplied when he regained his fitness or gone for other military positions that were equally prestigious.

Hitler only had relationships with younger women, ending up with Eva Braun, and it is generally agreed that his interest in sex was low.<sup>13</sup> According to Auguste Kubizek, despite never speaking to her, his relationship with Stefanie Rabatsch was entirely a fantasy. He would spend hours fantasising about their marriage and finally, recognising that it was not to be, stated that he planned to kidnap Stefanie and kill both her and himself by jumping off a bridge.<sup>14</sup>

McVeigh, for his part, was considered attractive by women but only had transient contacts, usually with married women, and avoided commitment.<sup>15</sup> The difficulties in finding a girlfriend ate away at him and he became an obsessive gambler. Unable to pay the gambling debts he then defaulted on repayments of a loan.

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<sup>12</sup> Rahman T, Resnick PJ, Harry B. Anders Breivik: Extreme Beliefs Mistaken for Psychosis. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*. 2016 Mar;44(1):28-35.

<sup>13</sup> There is no way of proving that Hitler was prone to the perversions of which he was accused and, in all likelihood, unlikely. Three of the five women he was involved with committed suicide.

<sup>14</sup> All the information about Hitler's relationships, even from Kubizek, must be regarded as speculative.

<sup>15</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (p. 108). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.



The one exception was Andrea Augustine (also listed as Peters) with whom he was besotted.<sup>16</sup> She refused to take the relationship further, married and moved away. McVeigh tracked her down, coming close to stalking her, but she was happy to stay a friend.<sup>17</sup> This thwarted relationship was the love of his life and had no chance of being fulfilled. Was the loss a spur to his destructive path?

Until he discovered his unique demagogic ability, Hitler, by all accounts, was regarded by those around him as strange. He alternated long periods of withdrawal, preoccupied with fantasies, with outbursts against anyone who contradicted his views. As his political career ascended, he charmed society women with his overdone Viennese manners.

McVeigh was quietly spoken and restrained. Far from the bearded scruffy demeanour of the survivalists, he was neatly dressed, politely spoken and maintained the military brush cut till the end.<sup>18</sup> However, after he left the army he was relentlessly proselytising everyone with his extremist views. His father complained about his outbursts whenever the Clintons came on the television. McVeigh dissociated himself from his boyhood friend Steve by sending him a 23-page farewell letter.<sup>19</sup> He proclaimed his devotion to the Declaration of Independence, explaining in detail what each sentence meant to him. The hugely overwritten letter resembles the testimonies of vexatious litigants.

## Conclusion

Both Hitler and McVeigh gloried in their combat experiences. Hitler responded to the WW1 defeat by subscribing to the 'stab in the back' conspiracy theory. For his part, McVeigh enjoyed the accolades as a combat hero but regarded US involvement in the war as unconscionable.<sup>20</sup>

Hitler, whenever he faced setbacks, would threaten suicide and finally killed himself when the Russians were at the doorstep of the bunker. McVeigh, controlled to the end, made no statement before his execution but copied out the poem "*Invictus*",

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<sup>16</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing (p. 111). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Toobin, Jeffrey. Homegrown: Timothy McVeigh and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism (p. 55). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing (p. 230). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.

<sup>19</sup> Michel, Lou; Herbeck, Dan. American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing (p. 173). BookBaby. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Toobin, Jeffrey. Homegrown: Timothy McVeigh and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism (p. 53). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.



the final pronouncement of his heroic self-identity.<sup>21</sup> He would have been better to consider these lines from Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*:

*Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind.*

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<sup>21</sup> Toobin, Jeffrey. *Homegrown: Timothy McVeigh and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism* (p. 349). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.



## Appendix

*Table 1. Forensic criteria for determining affective or predatory violence<sup>22</sup> (Meloy [2,57,58])*

### **Affective violence**

1. Intense autonomic arousal
2. Subjective experience of emotion
3. Reactive and immediate violence
4. Internal or external perceived threat
5. Goal is threat reduction
6. Possible displacement of target
7. Time-limited behavioural sequence
8. Preceded by public posturing
9. Primarily emotional/ defensive
10. Heightened and diffuse awareness

### **Predatory violence**

- Minimal or absent autonomic arousal
- No conscious emotion
- Planned or purposeful violence
- No imminent perceived threat
- Variable goals  
No displacement of target
- No time limited sequence Preceded by private ritual Primarily cognitive/attack
- Heightened and focused awareness

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<sup>22</sup> Meloy JR. Empirical basis and forensic application of affective and predatory violence. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 2006; 40:539–547.



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