

The desperate search for elusive answers

The Oklahoma City bombing lacks the dimmest sign of logic.
Its configuration is as ragged as the disaster.

Fred Bruning

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Americans continue searching for ways to explain the horrific bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City as fervently as rescue workers hunted corpses in the debris. The task at ground zero was heartbreaking, but yielded results—terrible results, though they were—and allowed for what psychologists are fond of calling “closure.” The effort to assess the attack likewise is drenched with melancholy—specifically, because the goal is so elusive, so hauntingly out of reach. For those who want only to understand, “closure” is a casualty as well.

Each body eased from the wreckage answered an awful question for family and friends. But the nation cannot expect even that sort of grim satisfaction in its quest for reason. Finite matters of guilt and innocence will be settled at some point, but solutions to larger mysteries—Why now? Why us?—remain among the missing. No dream team of attorneys and investigators can pursue a trail so faint and metaphysical. The event lacks the dimmest sign of logic. Its configuration is as ragged as the disaster site, all sharp edges and dangerous footing. We’re on our own.

A direct and forthright people, Americans are deeply troubled by complications and loose ends. Yet that is what the Oklahoma affair is about—complications, loose ends, the labyrinthine nature of human behavior. So we struggle to link cause and effect. Immediately after the Oklahoma City bombing, word went forth that the culprits were Mideastern—that the 1993 World Trade Center blast in New York City was being replayed in the “heartland” of the United States. A high-rise office in anonymous Oklahoma City seemed a peculiar target for international terrorists, but the facts were the facts. Angry voices urged tighter immigration laws, and Arab-Americans shuddered at a new round of ugly accusations.

Abruptly, the situation changed. Officials determined the enemy had come from within—the villains were American!—and just like that, we were deprived of a foreign demon or rational interpretation. With the focus suddenly on right-wing “militia” groups, President Bill Clinton called for legislation that would give authorities new power to infiltrate upstart organizations—in other words, to slip back to a time when agents harassed antiwar and civil rights groups, and generally treated dissidents like traitors. A former Vietnam protester himself, Clinton should know better.

The President next delivered a tirade against the “promoters of paranoia” featured on certain radio talk shows. Clinton claimed the unnamed on-air hosts “spread hate” and demanded they control themselves. White House aides insisted the boss meant to single out no one in particular, but right-wing broadcasters said they had a pretty good idea who Clinton had in mind. “The blame game is under way,” howled Oliver North, the former Iran-contra conspirator who now has a talk show based in Washington.

Personalities like North and Rush Limbaugh said it was unfair to suggest their shows encourage depraved acts like the Oklahoma City bombing, and that no one can be responsible enough to anticipate the secret yearnings of a lunatic. Here we may have recorded the only intelligent thought these characters ever managed. Clinton got it wrong again: right-wing radio is just a form of adult entertainment, the soft porn of political debate. Bombers are as apt to commit treachery after listening to North

or Limbaugh as moviegoers are likely to spill their life stories at bus stops after seeing *Forrest Gump*. The White House should manage the country and leave media criticism to *Saturday Night Live*.

This is not to say the anti-government drift is irrelevant, or that conservative talk-mongers act sensibly, or that armed militiamen are playful puppies, or that the parties who did Oklahoma City were simply misguided fools as opposed to purposeful anarchists, or that, in general, these are reassuring times in the United States.

Within a week of the federal attack, a timber industry lobbyist in California was killed by a parcel from the notorious Unabomber—an individual thought responsible for three deaths and 16 explosions in 17 years. Subsequently, the bomber sent a letter to *The New York Times* outlining the intentions of a group known as FC—some nutsiness about downsizing society into autonomous units and dismantling the “industrial-technological system.” People who ship bombs through the mail are not necessarily adept at shaping national policy.

There is indeed a strange sorcery at work in parts of the country. Some segment of America considers the federal government not just capable of intermittent bursts of great stupidity, but as a kind of renegade force that must be opposed at every opportunity. It may not be only coincidence that the Oklahoma City bombing occurred exactly two years after the disastrous attack by U.S. agents on the Branch Davidian sect outside Waco, Tex.—a mission that led to more than 80 deaths and inflamed partisans on America’s flaky, “patriotic” right who took the incident as a sign of Washington’s perfidy.

Curiously, the Oklahoma explosion came during a renewed discussion of America’s part in that great spasm of violence known as the Vietnam War. Prompting the debate was a book by Robert McNamara who served as defence secretary in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. McNamara finally admits the U.S. role was “terribly wrong” and worries that the war led to “cynicism” about government decision-making. Critics said McNamara admitted too little and missed the deadline for decency by two decades, but that view is self-defeating. Though seriously delayed, McNamara’s concerns were worth expressing and had an eerie timeliness. If some Americans now are inclined to draw a line between the saw grass of Vietnam and the rubble of downtown Oklahoma City, so be it. Theirs is as good a guess as any.

The Ted K Archive

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