

# Seen But Not Heard

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July 1995

During the same week that a truck bomb murdered 167 people in Oklahoma City, Robert S. McNamara published his recollections of the Vietnam War, and for a period of several days on the television news shows the once-upon-a-time secretary of defense kept bobbing up on the screen in the intervals between the casualty reports from the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. The scenes of gaping ruin or of Timothy J. McVeigh under arrest were intercut with those of McNamara, at the age of seventy-eight still as helpful and eager as a new boy scout, seated in a clean and well-lighted studio telling somebody in a clean and well-lighted suit that the war in Vietnam was a tragic mistake and that it wasn't his fault if so many people had so unnecessarily died.

The sequence repeated itself often enough to bring to mind a comparison between the two would-be saviors of Western civilization, the one in shackles and the other frequently in tears, who both construed heavy explosives as figures of speech. McNamara in the summer of 1965 explicitly defined the bombing raids that eventually murdered upwards of two million people north of Saigon as a means of communication. Bombs were metaphors meant to win the North Vietnamese to a recognition of America's inevitable victory, and American planes dropped what came to be known as "bomb-ograms" on civilian as well as military targets, less for tactical than for rhetorical reasons. By no means unique in his suppositions, McNamara was both the product and the servant of a society that likes to express itself in the grammar of violence, and he was caught up in a dream of power that substituted the databases of a preferred fiction for the texts of common fact. What was real was the image of war that appeared on the flowcharts and computer screens. What was not real was the presence of pain, suffering, mutilation, and death.

A similar form of reasoning apparently preceded the explosion in Oklahoma City on the morning of April 19. According to the FBI, McVeigh and his associates, among them another veteran of the Persian Gulf War named Terry L. Nichols, delivered a bomb-ogram in a rented truck, turning 4,800 pounds of fuel oil and ammonium nitrate into a press release. Although it wasn't immediately clear what the message said or to whom it was addressed, presumably it was meant to be understood as a criticism of the federal government. McVeigh and Nichols were known to associate with the kind of people who dress up in camouflage uniforms and believe that the Clinton Administration is a synonym for the Third Reich. Nichols had twice attempted to renounce his American citizenship, and McVeigh had been heard to talk at length about how "this country is going to hell in a handbasket." In February 1992, in a letter that he sent to a newspaper in upstate New York, he had set forth a list of opinions (about high taxes, crooked politicians, and the slipping away of "the American dream") not unlike those expressed by the members of the nation's better country clubs, who bang their fists on the bar and want to know what in God's name had gone wrong with the country since Bing Crosby died. McVeigh's language tended toward hyperbole—"Is a civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system?"—and it was conceivable that he had read some of the material circulated by the Christian

Coalition explaining how the decadent liberal news media sell the nation's soul into bondage, or how American presidents unwittingly serve "a new order for the human race under the domination of Lucifer."

But whatever it was that McVeigh and his confederates were trying to say about the country's political and spiritual affairs mattered less than the way in which they chose to say it. The politics were in the form of address, not in the points of argument, and five days after the explosion in Oklahoma City, the correspondent known to the police as "The Unabomber" entered the conversation with a mail bomb (a small, heavy package wrapped in brown paper) that killed the man who opened it in an office in Sacramento, California. The force of the explosion blew out the door and all the windows in the room, and in an accompanying letter received the same day by the *New York Times*, the author of the bomb, who apparently had been sending similar compositions for seventeen years (murdering three and severely wounding twenty-two others), offered to cease hostilities in return for a book contract and certain publication of his treatise on the evils of the "worldwide industrial system." Although presumably meant as singular and obvious statements, the April bombings (appended to the executions carried out over the last year of three people working in abortion clinics) posed a series of ambiguous questions. How do we construe the American idea of freedom, and what do we mean by democracy if we must communicate with one another by bomb-o-gram?

In what now seem like the good old days before the end of the Cold War, it was supposed to be fairly easy to know who and what was American. Americans weren't Communists. Americans were the freest and happiest people ever to walk the earth, generous to a fault, sometimes criminal and often foolish, but always fair and open-minded and on their way to a bright future. Without the operatic stage set of the evil Soviet empire, the familiar truths no longer seem quite so self-evident, and the future has begun to look a good deal less sunny than it appears in the travel advertisements. The unforeseen collapse of the world-encircling Communist conspiracy removed the dark backcloth against which we were accustomed to project the contrasting images of American innocence and goodness of heart, and in the absence of the Russian antagonists on the totalitarian steppe, how do we recognize the protagonist on the freedomloving prairie? What kind of people do we wish to become, and how do we know an American when we see one? Is it possible to pursue a common purpose without a common history or a standard text?

The short answer to the last question is probably no. Democracy is a difficult art of government, demanding of its citizens high ratios of courage and literacy, and at the moment we lack both the necessary habits of mind and a sphere of common reference. The marvel of postmodern communications—five hundred television channels, CD-ROM, the Internet—invites each of us to construct a preferred reality, furnished, like McNamara's theory of Vietnam, with the objects of wish and dream. The commonwealth of shared meaning divides into remote worlds of our own invention, receding from one another literally at the speed of light. We need never see or talk to anybody

with whom we don't agree, and we can constitute ourselves as our own governments in perpetually virtuous exile. For every benign us, we can nominate a malignant them (ice people, femi-Nazis, FBI agents, etc.); and for every distant they, a blessed and neighboring we.

Reluctant to address the more difficult questions raised in Oklahoma, the major news media were in no hurry to encourage debate or welcome unedited opinions. It was easier and far less disturbing to ascribe the explosion to lunatics—first Muslim fundamentalists and then American extremists in various denominations—people so abnormal that they couldn't be confused with the boy next door. In support of this interpretation, the media hastily arranged introductions to a number of the country's militia outfits—mostly middle-aged men in paramilitary gear standing disconsolately around with assault rifles in Idaho or Montana—as well as some of the more offensive voices on the talk-radio circuit. As proof of the former, the readers of the country's better newspapers met James (Bo) Gritz, a former Green Beret commander in Vietnam and a founder of Almost Heaven, a Christian Covenant Community convinced that white people are the masters of the earth. As an example of the latter, NBC News ran a televised clip of G. Gordon Liddy, a former White House aide to President Richard Nixon, who conducts a program called *Radio Free D.C.* in which he often and offhandedly refers to the government in Washington as a cabal of despotic tyrants bent on enslaving the American people. The clip showed him advising those of his listeners likely to find themselves under sudden assault to avoid shooting the federal agents in the chest because they would be wearing flak jackets. “Head shots,” Liddy said. “Head shots.”

Again the medium was the message. By their very nature the television cameras couldn't help but present the Oklahoma killing as a new attraction displacing the O. J. Simpson trial at the top of the hour on CNN—not because the producers were cynical, or because they searched out subjects resembling the villains in a James Bond movie, but because everybody in the country understands by now the rhetorical devices of television news. The entire narrative could be inferred from the first five minutes of footage from the Murrah Building—the scenes of catastrophe, the obligatory interviews with local officials making the obligatory announcements, the pundits in Washington worrying about what it all means, a new computer graphic meant to hold viewer attention at least until the first commercial break.

The standard packaging doesn't allow for any exceptions to the rules, and the sophisticated viewers, knowing that nothing would be said that might slow the sale of the product, remained free to regard the bombing as pure spectacle. A man had set off a bomb, killing 167 people with the force of an explosion big enough to blow a Toyota 130 miles into the sky, attacking the fundamental premise of American democracy (and thus the life and liberty of every citizen in the country), but we could choose to look upon the event as if it were another melancholy postcard from Rwanda or the first network showing of *Die Hard 2*.

Perceived as entertainment, the explosion wasn't an assigned civics lesson, and well before the last of the victims suffocated under the weight of broken concrete, the story had begun to lose its audience and market share. No celebrities had been found in the wreckage, and the more exciting drama of the moment was the one about Michael Jordan's happy return to the Chicago Bulls.

Among the few journalists who wondered whether the explosion might have had something to do with the increasingly poisonous atmosphere of the American political debate, none suggested that McVeigh had campaigned for Oliver North or implied a direct connection between four thousand pounds of ammonium nitrate and the bombast of the reactionary Republican right. They pointed out that McVeigh wasn't as sophisticated as the Washington columnists and politicians who didn't really mean it when they talked about "pagan tyrants" and "jackbooted thugs," and that maybe his bomb could be understood as a work in mixed media—a crude metaphor made in a basement or a garage instead of a recording studio or a policy institute, less amusing and more literal-minded than the toy anarchism of Bob Mohan or the feckless clowning of Rush Limbaugh, but constructed with the same ideological materials.

The point was well taken, but any and all speculations along such lines were immediately condemned by the prominent news media as "shameless," "transparently self-serving," "plain malicious," "absurd." George Will, the conservative newspaper columnist who also serves as the embodiment of the received wisdom on *This Week with David Brinkley*, codified what promptly became the official as well as the majority opinion. Writing in the *Washington Post* and mustering an impressive roster of historical references (John Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Butler Yeats, and the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794), Will assured his readers that the "attempt to locate in society's political discourse the cause of a lunatic's action is . . . contemptible." Similar tones of voice characterized the response of the major Washington news organizations to readings of the Oklahoma City text that didn't agree with their own. The little world within the Beltway is as self-referential as the little worlds within the talk-show nation, and official Washington declines to accept messages unsuitable to an appearance on *Nightline* or a drop-in at a Georgetown cocktail party. The capital is a city of words, but words understood as objects and tokens of power, words as ends in themselves (like fireworks or marble fountains or truck bombs), meant for display and not as expressions of thought. On the Friday after the bombing, two respondents telephoned National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* to express inadmissible views, and both of them were quickly silenced by anchors Neal Conan and Nina Totenberg.

CONAN: Let's go to the phones now. Tom, you're on the line in Oakland, California. TOM: . . . We have militia recruiting heavily in Oakland and the San Francisco Bay Area, and actually I run into them because we have shared problems with the authorities in that we're abused by the local government and by the federal government. . . . We would be the "Food Not Bombs"—we feed the homeless and were violently attacked by

the authorities. I have no respect for the government and I'm a pacifist, and I'm against bombing. I can understand the idea that people would be opposed to the United States government, and I'd like people to reflect on the fact . . . that there were in Iraq, there were Oklahoma Federal Building—type bombings that happened every minute all day long. . .

CONAN: Tom! Tom! Tom! Tom! Tom!

(As caller's voice is fading out, we hear him say "and in East Timor" and then NPR cuts caller off entirely.)

CONAN: Good-bye, Tom. Thank you very much. Let's now go to Nick in Charles Town, West Virginia.

NICK: ... I have no sympathy whatsoever for the heinous perpetrators. ... It really gives us an opportunity as a nation to see that the real threats to national security in this country are internal, primarily, and only secondarily and maybe tertiarily external. And the way I would put it is if you look at what's called the quote unquote mainstream political debate in this country, it's become perfectly okay—the coverage loves people like Newt Gingrich and Dornan, and Rush Limbaugh has become a superstar, and it's clear from their rhetoric, from their propaganda—

TOTENBERG (interrupting): Now you don't really wanna say that. You don't really wanna stick Rush Limbaugh with the bombing, do you?

NICK: No. Let me put it this way: the whole political debate has been put so far to the right that it's understandable that if you tell enough people that the government is the focus of evil and that everything wrong in this country is due to the federal government, and you portray the President as some kind of a satanic figure who murders people, and, you know—

CONAN (interrupting) I m not sure that any of the people you've identified have talked about the President as a satanic figure or that this has to do with the political debate in this country. We're going to have to take a short break . . .

President Clinton didn't have much better luck with the Washington press than Tom in Oakland or Nick in Charles Town. The bodies of the dead were still being carried out of the rubble in Oklahoma City when he told an audience of college teachers in Minnesota that the "purveyors of hatred and division" on some of the nation's radio shows seemed intent on keeping "some people as paranoid as possible and the rest of us all torn up and upset with each other." Not unreasonably, he thought the angry rhetoric harmful to the hope of democratic government—not because it was angry but because it was made of lies—and of the more splenetic broadcasters he said, "When they talk of hatred, we must stand against them. "When they talk of violence, we must stand against them."

The President was trying to say that words matter and that sometimes ideas have consequences, but his remarks incited the apologists for the Republican right to a fury of partisan interpretation. In line with the general muttering about “the Democrats” changing the currency of human tragedy into the base coin of political insult, Senator Phil Gramm, the Texas Republican and presidential candidate, all but threatened the President with a libel action. Newt Gingrich, the speaker of the House of Representatives, said that it was “grotesque” to imply even a rumor of a connection between forthright political speech and hateful crime, “grotesque and offensive” to associate “legitimate questions about the size and scope of the federal government” with the kind of people who dress up in camouflage uniforms or refer to “tinhorn bureaucrats” and federal “Gestapo agents.” The conservative majority in the mainstream press (the *Wall Street Journal*, *Time* magazine, the columnists William F. Buckley and William Safire, etc.) cried up the same line of trembling indignation and vehement denial. The collective sophistry ignored the Republican campaign rhetoric in last year’s elections—e.g., Gingrich attributing the drowning of two small children in a South Carolina lake to the brutality of a liberal news media—as well as the *Wall Street Journal*’s fondness for extreme statement—editorials promoting the rumor of Vince Foster’s murder or condemning “magazines published by thirtysomething women in New York” for leading innocent midwestern girls into prostitution on Eighth Avenue—and Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, advising President Clinton last November not to visit North Carolina military outposts unless he was prepared to entertain the risk of assassination. .

The denials failed as argument, but they served to reduce the threat of large and disturbing questions—the ones about the prospects of democratic government—to smaller and more trivial subtexts that could be fitted to the rules of the Washington board game and controlled by the mechanics of political spin. What wasn’t being said, either in Congress or on the television news, was that the spirit of liberty is never far from anarchy and that an ordinary American is apt to look a good deal more like Timothy McVeigh than one of the golfers standing around on the fairway in an ad for this year’s Cadillac Seville.

On the Monday after the explosion in Oklahoma City I came across a fragment of an uncompleted manuscript that Simone Weil wrote down on a scrap of paper in September 1939:

... we need first of all to have a clear conscience. Let us not think that because we are less brutal, less violent, less inhuman than our opponents we will carry the day. Brutality, violence, and inhumanity have an immense prestige that schoolbooks hide from children, that grown men do not admit, but that everyone bows before. For the opposite virtues to have as much prestige, they must be actively and constantly put into practice. Anyone who is merely incapable of being as brutal, as violent, and as inhuman as

someone else, but who does not practice the opposite virtues, is inferior to that person in both inner strength and prestige, and he will not hold out in such a confrontation.

Weil was thinking of events in Poland and Nazi Germany, but the observation holds true of our own predicament in the United States—in the winter of 1778, or the spring of 1863, or the summer of 1995. It is never easy to be an American, not then, not now. The proposition is an existential one, obliging us to invent ourselves under terms and conditions usually adverse. We are all bound on a speculative journey, always on the way to someplace else, and when we meet one another as strangers in a bus station or an airport lounge we exchange summaries of our youth and early sorrows, the sequence of our exits and entrances, the estimated time of our spiritual arrival. What we hold in common is a unified field of emotion and a willingness to trust the reports of the other pilgrims on the road. Democracy proceeds from the premise that nobody knows all the answers, that nothing is final, and that the world is not oneself. We value the companionable virtues—helpfulness, tolerance, kindness, the patience to listen to one another—faithfully reflected in even so coarse a mirror as the one held up to us by the soap operas on afternoon television. Revealed in the broad light of an Oklahoma day, the companionable virtues gave the lie to the caricature of demonic government loyal to the command of Lucifer. At the time of the explosion the “pagan tyrants” supposedly feeding on the substance of an enslaved citizenry had been paying farm subsidies, arranging student loans, looking after children. Weeping law-enforcement officials (a.k.a. “Gestapo agents,” “jackbooted thugs”) nursed the wounded and carried out the dead.

No matter how often it has been corrupted and abused (simply by reason of its being such a difficult feat to perform), democratic government retains the affection of its citizens because it attempts to rally the freedom of mind against the tyranny of money, superstition, and force. Among all the American political virtues, plain speech is the one most necessary to the success of our mutual enterprise. Unless we try to tell one another the truth about what we know and think and see (i.e., the story so far as it appears to the travelers on the voyage out or the journey home), we cheat ourselves of our courage and destroy the chance of our freedom. Because democratic institutions do not renew themselves as effortlessly as flowering trees, they require cultivation by people brave enough and honest enough to admit their mistakes and accept responsibility for even their most inglorious acts. It is never easy to tell the truth, and most of us seldom get it right, but our repeated and familiar failures do not excuse us from making the attempt. The truth is precious in even very small amounts. The lies might win elections (or sell books and spectacles and Florida real estate), but after a while, when the words no longer mean anything, it occurs to somebody without an invitation to *Nightline* that maybe Ted Koppel will listen to a bomb.

Clearly alarmed by so distinct a possibility, the Senate judiciary committee on April 27, eight days after the explosion in Oklahoma, opened hearings on hurriedly



redrafted legislation meant to protect the country from outbreaks of terrorism. The bill provided the Justice and Treasury Departments with enlarged powers to keep track of any and all citizens deemed suspicious, and as I watched the C-SPAN broadcast of the testimony, I was struck by the willingness of almost everybody in the room—the senators as eagerly as the witnesses—to exchange their civil liberties for an illusory state of perfect security. They seemed to think that democracy was just a fancy word for corporate capitalism, and that the society would be a lot better off if it stopped its futile and unremunerative dithering about constitutional rights. Why humor people, especially poor people, by listening to their idiotic theories of social justice? In support of McVeigh’s dark melodrama about the country “going to hell in a handbasket” (a fiction only slightly different from McVeigh’s or from the ones in vogue in places like Palm Springs), all present sought to magnify the threat pressing upon the United States from every quarter of the compass—“domestic fanatics and foreign ideologues,” neo-Nazis, anti-Semites, members of the Ku Klux Klan, terrorists armed with nuclear or biological weapons backing up their rented trucks to the gates of once safe suburbs, drifting through the passes in the Rocky Mountains as silently as the Indian tribes that once descended on the luckless Colonel Custer.

Louis Freeh, the director of the FBI, recommended supervision of any groups “advocating social or political change,” and several witnesses spoke of “open warfare” looming on the horizon of the millennium. And most of them endorsed the principle of “preventive intelligence” and strongly urged a “sustained strategic approach” heavily buttressed by larger sums of money and broader permission to seize bankrupt records and affix wiretaps. The members of the judiciary committee listened to the testimony like children listening to a fairy tale, smiling and nodding at the mention of tagging explosives and decriminalizing chemicals, glad to know that here at last maybe they had found an enemy to take the place of the Russian apparition in the alien snow. Like road-show magicians doing tricks with colored scarves, the witnesses filled the hearing room with the fears that the senators had come to behold, and again I was reminded of distant worlds and soundproof rooms, of the paranoid romances broadcast to the talk-show nation and drifting like wood smoke through the militia camps in Idaho, of how easily the systems of postmodern communication make possible the retreat into the sanctuaries of the self.

Democracy was made for open country and public spaces in which people spoke to one another face to face. Understood as a means and not an end, democratic government defends the future against the past, allowing its citizens the liberty to think and make and build. But if we wish to live in so generous a state of freedom, we must accustom ourselves to the shadows on the walls and the wind in the trees. The sense of uncertainty is the cost of doing business. As has been said, the proposition is an existential one, but it doesn’t conform to the temper of the times. As the world has come to be seen as a more dangerous and chaotic place than it was dreamed of in the philosophy of Walt Disney, a considerable number of people have been persuaded to

think of democracy as a summer vacation, a matter of consensus and parades, and in the ensuing confusion they have come to imagine that democracy is a suburban idea and that the United States constitutes a refuge from the storm of the world.

The hope is illusory. All the police and all the armies in the world cannot save us from our own stupidity and fear. If too many of us hide in barns (or behind the rhetoric that reduces human character and history to lists of shining abstraction) the political initiative passes to the demagogues in the streets, and society falls prey to the extremists who claim alliance with the Archangel Gabriel and the absolute truth. We won't like the result, but in the meantime, while waiting for something really important to turn up (a new revolution in Russia, say, or a riot in northeast Washington), we can come and go, talking of Thomas Jefferson and the Internet, admiring one another's moral poses, dismayed by the rumors of war and secondhand smoke, wondering whether it might not be possible to put the whole of the country, or at least the lower forty-eight states, behind bars or under glass.

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*Harper's Magazine* July 1995, 29-36. Address: 666, Broadway, New York, New York  
10012 USA. Republished in *Peace Review*, #3-4, 7, pages 267-274, 1995. DOI:  
1040-2659/95/030267-08.

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