On Eve of His Execution, McVeigh's Legacy Remains Death and Pain

Rick Bragg

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His legacy, no matter how many psychiatrists and criminal experts investigate or dissect the events, relationships and disappointments that shaped him, will always be calculated in simple numbers. Timothy J. McVeigh killed, by the cowardly means of a truck bomb, 168 people — 149 adults and 19 children.

His death, until a little more than a month ago, was to be one of simple retribution, carried out in the clinical atmosphere of a prison's death chamber here after he was found guilty of the crime in a dignified federal court.

His surviving victims, both those who lost family members and the many others he scarred and maimed in Oklahoma City in April 1995, would then go on with their lives, with the satisfaction that the system — the very system that Mr. McVeigh hated and tried to destroy — still works.

But then came the Federal Bureau of Investigation's admission that it had failed to provide thousands of pages of evidence to the court and to Mr. McVeigh's lawyers, and the bomber's legacy shifted, if only slightly.

His death, scheduled for Monday, now, more than ever, serves his own purpose — at least to those who believe, like him, in the evil of the government. Inmates in the prison with him have said that he has been dieting so as to appear thin and gaunt — like a Holocaust victim — when they strap him down to die.

The government, by fumbling a case that so needed to be perfect, "has knocked him off his monster's perch," said Bud Welch, whose daughter, Julie, 23, died in the blast.

As the clocked ticked down to the execution, news that Mr. McVeigh had finally offered an apology to the victims was reported on national television. But it turned out to be little satisfaction to the people in Oklahoma City.

"I am sorry these people had to lose their lives," Mr. McVeigh wrote in one of a series of letters to be published Sunday in The Buffalo News. "But that's the nature of the beast. It's understood going in what the human toll will be."

In the letters, he continued to say that the bombing was necessary in his war to protect the personal freedoms of Americans, and to take revenge for government raids at Waco, Tex., and Ruby Ridge, Idaho. He called the bombing "a legit tactic."

Perhaps the most chilling legacy left by Mr. McVeigh is his ordinary life story: the son of a travel agent and an auto worker who found few prospects after high school, who joined the Army and won medals in the gulf war before washing out of training for the elite Special Forces, a failure that led to his creeping anger toward the government.

Like countless others, he failed to find a niche when he returned from military service, working for low wages, failing to build any lasting relationships — or even many fleeting ones — with women, finally moving back in with his father and sleeping on the couch.

It is an American story, if not a happy one. "It is so fearful because he was so all-American," at least on the surface, said Samuel Gross, a law professor at the University of Michigan and an expert on executions. "He was not a demented, crazy person like Ted Kaczynski. He had led an ordinary life, just an ordinary ex-G.I., come home. There was nothing about him that would stand out at a church picnic in Oklahoma City."

Mr. McVeigh's father, Bill, said there was nothing in his son's boyhood that foretold this tragedy. Fellow soldiers said he was a racist, but a lot of people talked the way he did. Only as he neared the end of his service, as he came to read the literature of hate groups, to stockpile guns and to begin talking to others in racist, antigovernment rhetoric, did he seem extreme, said people who knew him then.

But that, too, was just a facade. There was a meanness, a zeal in him, that was hidden still.

Mr. McVeigh has tried to manipulate his legacy, through the book "American Terrorist," in which he admits his guilt but tries to rationalize it, and through letters and carefully selected interviews.

In an April letter to Rita Cosby of the Fox News Channel, Mr. McVeigh wrote that the bombing was a "retaliatory strike," and he described federal agents as soldiers. "Additionally, borrowing a page from U.S. foreign policy," he wrote, "I decided to send a message to a government that was becoming increasingly hostile, by bombing a government building and the government employees within that building who represent that government. Bombing the Murrah Federal Building was morally and strategically equivalent to the U.S. hitting a government building in Serbia, Iraq or other nations."

But it was the federal government that gave Mr. McVeigh — ultimately — the greatest means by which to justify his antipathy, with its own mistakes, said experts on the law and hate groups, and some of the people he hurt with his bomb.

"At its root," it creates distrust of the agency that was charged with upholding the law, said Leonard Zeskind, the founder of the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights in Kansas City, Mo., who has studied hate groups for 20 years.

Any credibility that Mr. McVeigh gains is a slap to his victims.

"It's stupid for us to execute him now," said Mr. Welch, who has opposed the death penalty for Mr. McVeigh from the beginning, in part because he sees no good in one more death, in part because he fears that it will erase any chance of finding others who may have been involved.

But now Mr. McVeigh's execution may do the one thing that Mr. Welch and others here cannot abide. It gives people like him evidence that the federal government did not properly prosecute Mr. McVeigh.

"In many ways, they win," Mr. Welch said. "There is no question about his guilt, but now it's tainted."

Experts on the law and on hate groups said that despite the smudge on his prosecution, Mr. McVeigh was still seen as a monster who brutally murdered old people, babies, mothers and fathers.

He is still seen as a perversion, still regarded as a sick and distorted version of what an American soldier is supposed to be. Most of his victims, those still alive, have said they regret this latest development, but still want him to die.

He remains, as Jannie Coverdale, the grandmother of two children who died in the bombing, has described him, "the devil in a Ryder truck."

But he has his believers.

"I shudder to think that people like Mr. McVeigh will have any legacy," Mr. Gross said. He said that the only people who would buy, publicly and wholeheartedly, this latest of American conspiracy theories were "a tiny, crazy fringe of people."

"Among that extremely small group," Mr. Gross said, "the sequence of events leading up to his execution will reinforce their beliefs." That will not be thousands of people, he said, but a few hundred.

But, he pointed out, the frightening fact is that it took only a few people to design and build the bomb. And it only took one, Mr. McVeigh, to drive the truck to the front of the building.

In the way that Mr. McVeigh was affected by the government's actions near Waco will the cloud over Mr. McVeigh's execution convince other extremists of the government's corruption and conspiracies?

Mr. Welch and others in Oklahoma City fear that it may.

"If we had given him a life sentence, he would not be tormenting anyone now," Mr. Welch said. "Terry Nichols isn't tormenting anyone," he said, referring to Mr. McVeigh's co-conspirator, who is serving life in prison.

But even with the government's inadvertent help in lending a smidgen of credibility to Mr. McVeigh's war on that government, his ultimate legacy is one of fire and pain.

In "American Terrorist," by Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, Mr. McVeigh referred to the children killed in the blast as "collateral damage" and said that, when he first saw television pictures after the blast, his first feeling was regret for not bringing the whole building down.

His efforts to remake himself, to form his legacy, had been mostly laughed at or ignored. When he said he was not a racist, that it was the gun control aspects of a racist novel, "The Turner Diaries," that moved him, that he joined the Ku Klux Klan only because he wanted one of its T-shirts, both the public and experts on militias and hate groups just shook their heads.

"You don't need to join to get the T-shirt," Mr. Zeskind said.

Mr. McVeigh will die an enigma, said many who have followed his case, never fully explaining why he did what others only talked about doing. Even his writings give no real clue to his character.

His motives for the bombing were addressed, but hardly made clear, in letters to friends and others. In those letters, he seemed to be quoting from antigovernment pamphlets.

In a letter to Robert Popovich, a former neighbor of Terry L. Nichols's, Mr. McVeigh wrote: "It was at this time, after waiting for nonviolent checks and balances to correct ongoing federal abuses and seeing no such results, that the assault-weapons ban passed, and rumors subsequently surfaced of nationwide Waco-style raids scheduled for the spring of 1995 to confiscate firearms. It was in this climate then that I reached the decision to go on the offensive, to put a check on government abuse of power, where others had failed in stopping the federal juggernaut run amok."

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