

Ted Kaczynski's Comments on Timothy McVeigh

Ted Kaczynski

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I should begin by noting that the validity of my comments about McVeigh is limited by the fact that I didn't know him terribly well. We were often put in the outdoor rec yard together in separate wire-mesh cages, but I always spent most of the rec period running in a small oval, because of the restricted area of the cages and consequently I had only about 15 or 20 minutes of each rec period for talking with other inmates. Also, I was at first reluctant to become friendly with McVeigh because I thought (correctly) that any friendly relations between McVeigh and me would be reported to the media and I also thought (incorrectly, it seems) that such reports would lose me many supporters. But my reluctance very soon passed away: When you're confined with other people under the conditions that exist on this range of cells, you develop a sense of solidarity with them regardless of any differences or misgivings.

On a personal level I like McVeigh and I imagine that most people would like him. He was easily the most outgoing of all the inmates on our range of cells and had excellent social skills. He was considerate of others and knew how to deal with people effectively. He communicated somehow even with the inmates on the range of cells above ours, and, because he talked with more people, he always knew more about what was going on than anyone else on our range.

Another reason why he knew more about what was going on was that he was very observant. Up to a point, I can identify with this trait of McVeigh's. When you've lived in the woods for a while you get so that your senses are far more alert than those of a city person; you will hardly miss a footprint, or even a fragment of one, and the slightest sound, if it deviates from the pattern of sounds that you're expecting to hear at a given time and place, will catch your attention. But when I was away from the woods, or even when I was in my cabin or absorbed in some task, my senses tended to turn inward, so to speak, and the observant alertness was shut off. Here at the ADX, my senses and my mind are turned inward most of the time, so it struck me as remarkable that even in prison McVeigh remained alert and consistently took an interest in his surroundings.

It is my impression that McVeigh is very intelligent. He thinks seriously about the problems of our society, especially as they relate to the issue of individual freedom, and to the extent that he expressed his ideas to me they seemed rational and sensible. However, he discussed these matters with me only to a limited extent and I have no way of being sure that he does not have other ideas that he did not express to me and that I would not consider rational or sensible. I know almost nothing about McVeigh's opinions concerning the U.S. government or the events at Waco and Ruby Ridge. Someone sent me a transcript of his interview with 60 Minutes, but I haven't read it yet. Consequently, I have no way of knowing whether I would consider his opinion on these subjects to be rational or sensible.

McVeigh is considered to belong to the far right, and for that reason some people apparently assume that he has racist tendencies. But I saw no indication of this. On the contrary, he was on very friendly terms with the African-American inmates here and I never heard him make any remark that could have been considered even remotely

racist. I do recall his mentioning that prior to the Gulf War, he and other soldiers were subjected to propaganda designed to make them hate the people they were going to fight, but when he arrived in the Persian Gulf area he discovered that the “enemies” he was supposed to kill were human beings just like himself, and he learned to respect their culture.

McVeigh told me of his idea (which I think may have significant merit) that certain rebellious elements on the American right and left respectively had more in common with one another than is commonly realized, and that the two groups ought to join forces. This led us to discuss, though only briefly, the question of what constitutes the “right.” I pointed out that the word “right,” in the political sense, was originally associated with authoritarianism, and I raised the question of why certain radically anti-authoritarian groups (such as the Montana Freemen) were lumped together with authoritarian factions as the “right.” McVeigh explained that the American far right could be roughly divided into two branches, the fascist/racist branch, and the individualistic or freedom-loving branch which generally was not racist. He did not know why these two branches were lumped together as the “right,” but he did suggest a criterion that could be used to distinguish left from right: the left (in America today) generally dislikes firearms, while the right tends to be attracted to firearms.

By this criterion McVeigh himself would have to be assigned to the right. He once asked me what kind of rifle I’d used for hunting in Montana, and I said I’d had a .22 and a .30-06. On a later occasion McVeigh mentioned that one of the advantages of a .30-06 was that one could get armor-piercing ammunition for it. I said, “So what would I need armor-piercing ammunition for?” In reply, McVeigh indicated that I might some day want to shoot at a tank. I didn’t bother to argue with him, but if I’d considered it worth the trouble I could have given the obvious answer: that the chances that I would ever have occasion to shoot at a tank were very remote. I think McVeigh knew well that there was little likelihood that I would ever need to shoot at a tank—or that he would either, unless he rejoined the Army. My speculative interpretation is that McVeigh resembles many people on the right who are attracted to powerful weapons for their own sake and independently of any likelihood that they will ever have a practical use for them. Such people tend to invent excuses, often far-fetched ones, for acquiring weapons for which they have no real need.

But McVeigh did not fit the stereotype of the extreme right-wingers. I’ve already indicated that he spoke of respect for other people’s cultures, and in doing so he sounded like a liberal. He certainly was not a mean or hostile person, and I wasn’t aware of any indication that he was super patriotic. I suspect that he is an adventurer by nature, and America since the closing of the frontier has had little room for adventurers.

McVeigh never discussed the Oklahoma City bombing with me, nor did he ever make any admissions in my hearing. I know nothing about that case except what the media have said, so I’m not going to offer any opinion about whether McVeigh did what they say he did. However, assuming that the Oklahoma City bombing was intended as a protest against the U.S. government in general and against the government’s actions

at Waco in particular, I will say that I think the bombing was a bad action because it was unnecessarily inhumane.

A more effective protest could have been made with far less harm to innocent people. Most of the people who died at Oklahoma City were, I imagine, lower-level government employees—office help and the like—who were not even remotely responsible for objectionable government policies or for the events at Waco. If violence were to be used to express protest, it could have been used far more humanely, and at the same time more effectively, by being directed at the relatively small number of people who were personally responsible for the policies or actions to which the protesters objected. Such protest would have attracted just as much national attention as the Oklahoma City bombing and would have involved relatively little risk to innocent people. Moreover, the protest would have earned far more sympathy than the Oklahoma City bombing did, because it is safe to assume that many anti-government people who might have accepted violence that was more limited and carefully directed were repelled by the large loss of innocent life at Oklahoma City.

The media teach us to be horrified at the Oklahoma City bombing, but I won't have time to be horrified at it as long as there are greater horrors in the world that make it seem insignificant by comparison. Moreover, our politicians and our military kill people in far larger numbers than was done at Oklahoma City, and they do so for motives that are far more cold blooded and calculating. On orders from the president, a general will kill some thousands of people (usually including many civilians regardless of efforts to avoid such losses) without bothering to ask himself whether the killing is justified. He has to follow orders because his only other alternative would be to resign his commission, and naturally he would rather kill a few thousand people than spoil his career. The politicians and the media justify these actions with propaganda about "defending freedom." However, even if America were a free society (which it is not), most U.S. military action during at least the last couple of decades has not been necessary for the survival of American society but has been designed to protect relatively narrow economic or political interests or to boost the president's approval rating in the public-opinion polls.

The media portray the killing at Oklahoma City as a ghastly atrocity, but I remember how they cheered the U.S. action in the Gulf War just as they might have cheered for their favorite football team. The whole thing was treated as if it were a big game. I didn't see any sob stories about the death agonies of Iraqi soldiers or about their grieving families. It's easy to see the reason for the difference: America's little wars are designed to promote the interests of "the system," but violence at home is dangerous to the system, so the system's propaganda has to teach us the correspondingly correct attitudes toward such events. Yet I am much less repelled by powerless dissidents who kill a couple hundred because they think they have no other way to effectively state their protest, than I am by politicians and generals—people in positions of great power—who kill hundreds or thousands for the sake of cold calculated political and economic advantages.

You asked for my thoughts on the behavior of federal law enforcement officers. My personal experience suggests that federal law enforcement officers are neither honest nor competent, and that they often disobey their own rules.

I've found by experience that any communication with journalists is risky for one in my position. I'm taking the risk in this case mainly because I think that McVeigh would want me to help you in the way that I have. As I indicated near the beginning of this letter, when you're locked up with other people you develop a sense of solidarity with them in spite of any differences.

Sincerely yours, Ted Kaczynski.

The Ted K Archive

A critique of his ideas & actions



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Appendix B, pages 398 - 402 of the book American Terrorist.

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