

McVeigh interview sheds light on the social roots of the Oklahoma City bombing

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On March 12, CBS television's "60 Minutes" broadcast an interview with Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. It was only the second media interview conducted with McVeigh since the 1997 trial at which he was convicted and sentenced to death. He is currently incarcerated at a federal maximum-security prison in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Evidence at McVeigh's trial revealed how he constructed a 4,800-pound bomb in a rental truck and parked it in downtown Oklahoma City near the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995. The resulting explosion killed 168 people, including 19 children, and wounded 600. His actions were guided by extreme right-wing conceptions. He apparently hoped that the bombing of a federal facility would precipitate a civil war and ultimate overthrow of the government by rightist militia forces.

The bombing was a horrific crime. But neither the act nor the circumstances that conditioned McVeigh to commit it can simply be ascribed to individual malevolence. As McVeigh's "60 Minutes" interview underscored, the terrorist atrocity was ultimately the product of definite social and political conditions, which found a pathological expression in the actions of a particularly susceptible individual.

This aspect of the bombing has, not surprisingly, been all but ignored in the reams of media commentary of the past five years. To the extent that McVeigh is simply portrayed as a monster, the broader and more disturbing implications of his crime are more easily overlooked.

In his interview, McVeigh placed emphasis on his experiences as a soldier in the 1991 US-led invasion of Iraq. He said the war disillusioned him and deepened his anger against the government. He told CBS correspondent Ed Bradley, "I went over there hyped up, just like everyone else. What I experienced, though, was an entirely different ball game. And being face-to-face, close with these people in personal contact, you realize they're just people like you."

One might argue that McVeigh's opposition to the Persian Gulf War is of recent origin, perhaps an attempt to give himself a more human face. But even were that the case, it would not alter the fact that McVeigh touches on something very real—the trauma and psychologically damage that come from being thrown into a strange country to kill and destroy, especially

when one is using the most advanced weaponry in an unequal fight against an outmanned and poorly equipped foe.

As a soldier who fought with McVeigh reported, their unit made ready for battle by chanting, "Blood makes the grass grow. Kill! Kill! Kill!"

American capitalism has over the past four decades subjected hundreds of thousands of young people to just such trauma, in the pursuit of its global ambitions. The psychological and moral damage is compounded by the hypocrisy of the government and media, which justify militarism and the most terrible crimes with the most lofty rhetoric.

In his conversation with Bradley, McVeigh went on to say that the killing of right-wing activist Randy Weaver's wife and son by federal agents at Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992 and the killing—also by federal law enforcement officers—of some 80 members of the Branch Davidian sect in Waco, Texas in 1993 deepened his anger against the federal government. The Oklahoma City bombing took place two years to the day after the Waco incident.

Weaver was, to put it mildly, no friend of the working class. But that does not alter the fact that the deaths at Ruby Ridge were the unnecessary result of excessive force. The Waco massacre was an act of cold-blooded murder by the Clinton administration. It was carried out to make an object lesson of the religious cultists, whose real crime, as far as the government was concerned, was to challenge the authority of the state.

In the "60 Minutes" interview McVeigh refused to speak directly about the Oklahoma City bombing. He merely said, "Like everyone else, I thought it was a tragic event, and that's all I really want to say." Bradley: "And the children?" McVeigh: "I thought it was terrible that there were children in the building."

When he was asked if he would do anything differently if he could live his life over, he replied, somewhat chillingly: "I've thought about that quite a few times. And I think anybody in life says, 'I wish I could have gone back and done this differently, done that differently.' There are moments, but no one that stands out."

When Bradley asked if it were acceptable to use violence against the government, McVeigh replied: "If government is

the teacher, violence would be an acceptable option.” He went on, referring to US missile attacks against alleged terrorists and the NATO war in Kosovo, “What did we do to Sudan? What did we do to Afghanistan? Belgrade? What are we doing with the death penalty? It appears they use violence as an option all the time.”

These are telling points. They do not excuse McVeigh's crime, but they help explain it. They provide a framework for considering how a rather ordinary youth was transformed into someone capable of carrying out mass murder.

McVeigh was born in the late 1960s to working class parents, who divorced when he was 10. He was brought up in Pendleton, New York, near the decaying industrial center of Buffalo. His father and grandfather both worked for decades in the same auto parts plant, which stopped hiring in 1979.

The youth grew to manhood in the Reagan-Bush years, with all that implies. By the age of 14 he was already a survivalist, obsessed with guns and stockpiling food against the supposed danger of a nuclear attack or a communist takeover. Hostility to affirmative action became another theme in his outlook, leading to openly racist views.

Joining the army in 1988, McVeigh took to military life. He rose to sergeant and considered making the army his career. He avidly read survivalist magazines and rented the 1983 film, *Red Dawn*—about Midwestern teenagers battling the Soviet army—four times. He rented a storage locker in a nearby town and stockpiled food, water and weapons. The Gulf War interrupted his plans for a military career.

After discharge from the army, McVeigh held a number of low-paying jobs, often as a security guard. He drifted between Pendleton, Decker, Michigan, home of co-conspirator Terry Nichols, and Kingman, Arizona. Coworkers remember outbursts of anger. He was apparently delusional, telling people in Decker that the army had implanted a microchip in his buttocks so they could spy on him.

In 1992 he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Lockport* (New York) *Union-Sun*, in which he bewailed rising crime, “cataclysmic” taxes, politicians serving only themselves and the disappearance of the “American Dream ... substituted with people struggling just to buy next week's groceries.... AMERICA IS IN DECLINE.”

McVeigh's visits to Michigan put him into contact with the emerging right-wing militia movement. He became involved in the gun business, at one point advertising an anti-tank missile launcher in the far-right *Spotlight*, an anti-Semitic and fascistic publication. It was during this period that McVeigh's political outlook gelled.

As this brief sketch of his life indicates, McVeigh grew up at a time when the ruling elite in the US was relentlessly promulgating extreme right-wing conceptions: anticommunism, religious bigotry, anti-gay prejudice, militarism and chauvinism—all of this overlaid with Social Darwinist notions about the survival of the fittest. The essential purpose of this

ideological onslaught was to justify the accumulation of massive wealth in the hands of an elite at the expense of wide layers of the population.

Millions of working class youth like McVeigh were left with little hope of a fulfilling life or a decent future. Everything and everyone was to be sacrificed to the pursuit of profit. Worship of the market—equated with “freedom”—assumed a semi-religious character.

For a whole set of complex historical reasons, the frustration, resentment and sense of injustice generated by the social reaction and hypocrisy of the Reagan years did not find expression in the development of a mass, anti-capitalist movement of the working class. Indeed, the vast majority of Americans were denied access to the views of socialists, since the media exercised (and continues to exercise) a de facto ban on anti-capitalist opinion. Under these conditions, considerable numbers of distraught, disoriented people identified “anti-government” protest with the right, where demagogues—assiduously promoted by the media—promised a quick fix to America's problems.

Sections of the political elite openly cultivated the militia-type movements. The links between numerous Republican national and state politicians and extreme right-wing groups are well established.

It would oversimplify matters to describe McVeigh as the automatic result of these social and ideological conditions. His own emotional instability obviously came into play. There is something deranged about him. That his derangement took the particular form it did, however, has a broader social significance.

The same social soil that brought forward the right-wing terrorist McVeigh holds the seeds of a very different development. If the media systematically blocks socialist and left-wing ideas from reaching the general population, it is because its nervousness is well-founded. If masses of people were aware of the alternative represented by genuine socialism—with its critique of inequality, class exploitation and the waste of human and material resources in a system geared to enriching a privileged few—a socialist perspective would find an enormous response. In fact, the conditions for a movement to the left by a great number of people are rapidly maturing.



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