Execution Day in America

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Monday was Execution Day in America. The country awoke to the smiling faces of television anchors reporting from Oklahoma City and Terre Haute, Indiana that the final countdown to the execution of Timothy McVeigh had begun. Good Morning America!

Words fail in attempting to describe the spectacle that unfolded during the next 90 minutes. The media succeeded in transforming what was in itself a horrible event—the state-organized liquidation of a human life—into a day of national shamelessness and degradation.

No detail of the killing was omitted. The techniques perfected for high-profile sporting events were marshaled to draw the viewers in and make them feel like live witnesses, if not accomplices. The surreal atmosphere was only enhanced by the fact that the cameras were not allowed within miles of either the death chamber in Terre Haute or the site of a closed circuit broadcast for the relatives of victims in Oklahoma City—a restriction that clearly grated on those who staged the media coverage.

There were interviews with executioners who described the process that was unfolding behind the prison walls. “What was it like to kill a man?” asked reporters, looking for the “human interest” angle. What would McVeigh feel as the poison entered his body? What would he probably be thinking? How would the execution witnesses react? Would they recognize the precise moment of death as it occurred? How would they cope with the stress caused by the event? Were spiritual advisers on hand? Would the witnesses enjoy the rest of their day? And, of course, would they achieve “closure?”

The audience was treated to details about the lethal drugs from experts on such matters. CNN's Susan Candiotti scored something of a journalistic coup by noting that the chemical cocktail used to kill McVeigh had been developed in 1977 at the University of Oklahoma's Medical Center, located in Oklahoma City.

The macabre spectacle was punctuated by advertisements from the sponsors—AT&T, Wal-Mart, Outback Steakhouse, Toyota. Shortly before the execution, CBS carried a commercial from Ortho Tri-Cyclen, a birth-control pill.

Afterwards, reporters present at the death scene and other witnesses took the podium to describe McVeigh's every gesture: his facial expressions, his reaction to the drugs, etc.

There was a well-orchestrated attempt to justify the dehumanizing operation through interviews with Oklahoma City residents who lost family or friends in the 1995 explosion that shattered a federal building and killed 168 people. CBS ran an extended silent scroll of the names of McVeigh's victims.

The basic theme of the coverage was that McVeigh was receiving just and necessary retribution. A monster was being put to death. Nothing said that day, by either the media or the government, hinted that the terrorist crime was in any way related to social conditions or political realities in contemporary America.

President George W. Bush, speaking to reporters after the event, reiterated the same theme. He laid McVeigh's execution at the feet, not of the government, but of the victims of the bombing. They, Bush intoned, “have been given not vengeance, but justice.”

There followed phrases about mercy and peace from a man who in six years as governor of Texas presided over 152 executions, including people who were certified mentally ill or retarded. Maintaining a straight face, Bush went on to say, “The rights of the accused were protected and observed to the full and to the end.” He passed over the fact that the Federal Bureau of Investigation illegally withheld some 4,400 pages of documents from McVeigh's defense lawyers, and two federal courts set the stage for Monday's execution by refusing to grant a stay, denying the defense team a chance to properly study the files and make the case for an appeal of their client's death penalty.

Turning from the TV extravaganza to the press, one found more of the same. Most extraordinary was the commentary by the *New York Times*. It published an editorial Monday that was almost hysterical in its insistence that the Oklahoma City bombing was in no way a reflection of American society. The piece, entitled “History and Timothy McVeigh,” denied any connection between McVeigh's crime and historical events.

The Oklahoma City bomber, according to the *Times*, was a paranoid, cowardly megalomaniac, and that was all there was to it. “We have had six years to look into Mr. McVeigh's face,” the *Times* wrote. “What his eyes show us again and again is the sight of a man who is lost in his own delusional convictions.”

The editorial continued: “The Army did not form Mr. McVeigh. The gulf war did not alienate him.... He was his own invention, formed in the vacuum of a broken family, seduced by an ideal of militant self-control, tutored only in the infallible but utterly fallacious reasoning of outcasts devoted to overturning the government in pursuit of rights they already possess.”

The *Times* went on to call the Oklahoma City bombing “a work of vengeance by a man who had never been wronged.” It spoke of the 1993 Waco massacre without a hint of criticism of the government's role, and made a passing reference to the “administrative fumblings” of the FBI in McVeigh's trial, echoing the government's claim that the suppression of documents was inadvertent.

“We are left to wonder,” the *Times* editorialists pondered, “what chance event might have turned Mr. McVeigh into one of us...” Perhaps, we would suggest, a multimillion-dollar fortune like that possessed by the Sulzberger family, who publish the *Times*, would have altered McVeigh's fate.

The *Times*' claim that the Oklahoma City bombing was in no way linked to the social experiences of the past 30 years, and that McVeigh's own evolution had nothing to do with the society in which he lived, is absurd on its face.

No more credible is the attempt to portray McVeigh as evil

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incarnate. The world would be far easier to explain if terrible deeds were simply the product of terrible people. McVeigh was guilty of a monstrous crime, for which he certainly deserved life-long incarceration. But he was not a monster.

He was, rather, a complex individual whose personality was, in the final analysis, shaped by the society in which he lived. He was certainly not a coward, in any physical or personal sense. What makes his crime all the more disturbing is the fact that it was carried out by someone who was, in many respects, typical of millions of people in America—a person who, under different circumstances, could have turned out very differently.

The contention that McVeigh's stint in the army and his experience in the Gulf War had no bearing on his subsequent trajectory is similarly inane. McVeigh, according to his own account, went to the Persian Gulf as a gung-ho recruit, but what he experienced there traumatized him and turned him more firmly against his own government. He witnessed first hand a slaughter of virtually defenseless Iraqis that the US government and the media concealed from the American public.

This is how he later described the remorse he felt after killing two Iraqi soldiers: “What made me feel bad was, number one, I didn't kill them in self-defense.... We all have the same dreams, the same desires, the same care for our children and our family. These people were humans, like me, at the core.”

As for the incineration of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, this was, plain and simple, an act of mass murder carried out by the government against its own citizens. Eighty-six people were killed, including more children, 25, than were killed in the Oklahoma City bombing. One measure of the hypocrisy of the media is the fact that it has never interviewed those who were injured or lost loved-ones in that conflagration.

If McVeigh became a gun fanatic, he did so within a definite ideological environment. Was it not the corporate-owned media that bombarded American youth with militarism and chauvinism, mass-marketed in the image of Rambo? The political establishment and the media have for decades waged a mind-numbing campaign via the television, radio, records and film to promote the most right-wing ideologies and encourage every form of backwardness.

Moreover, the Republican Party, as the *Times* well knows, is largely controlled by an extreme right element whose political outlook is barely distinguishable from outright racist and fascist organizations. How different are the views of Attorney General John Ashcroft—an agent of the Christian right—from those of gun fanatics, survivalists and white supremacists? The main establishment mouthpiece of the Republican right, the *Wall Street Journal*, promotes views not so different from those of McVeigh, albeit with a somewhat more sophisticated vocabulary.

There are documented links between leading Republicans such as Georgia Rep. Bob Barr and Mississippi Senator Trent Lott and the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist and anti-Semitic outfit that emerged from the Jim Crow era white citizens councils. A whole section of Republican congressmen elected in 1994 solicited the support of militia groups and gun lobbies led by racists and fascists. At the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, one of then, Steve Stockman of Texas, received a fax informing him of the explosion from a fascist radio talk show host in Michigan. He relayed the fax not to government authorities, but to the National Rifle Association. The time stamp on the fax was actually an hour earlier than the time of the explosion.

It is, finally, absurd to deny any connection between McVeigh's anti-government feelings and his own upbringing in a part of New York state that was devastated by the wholesale closure of auto and steel plants. Although his anger became channeled along reactionary lines, it had a very real basis.

The most fundamental feature of American life is the staggering growth of economic inequality, a process that accelerated during the corporate boom of the 1990s. The policies of the financial elite and the two parties that do its bidding have dramatically eroded the living standards of broad masses of people, while enabling the most privileged layers to amass unheard of levels of wealth.

These social realities have engendered a growing sense of frustration and anger in the population at large. The Democratic Clinton administration, which was swept into power in 1992 on a pledge to reverse the reactionary social policies of the Reagan and Bush years, only compounded the social crisis by reneging on its campaign promises and overseeing a further growth of economic inequality.

There are reasons why embittered youth like McVeigh could become susceptible to the political nostrums of the extreme right. Given the inability and unwillingness of any section of the political establishment to address the concerns of working people, and the betrayal of the working class by its ostensible mass organizations, the trade unions, disillusioned youth look elsewhere for answers. To the extent that they as yet see no viable alternative to the profit system, they can become raw material for right-wing demagogues.

It is hardly necessary to say that McVeigh perpetrated a horrific crime. As socialists, we in the Socialist Equality Party, more than anyone else, can in good faith denounce what he did and everything he stood for. But moral outrage is not enough. It is no substitute for an understanding of the social and political conditions that ultimately gave rise to the Oklahoma City bombing.

What we wrote at the time of the bombing has been richly vindicated by subsequent events:

“The heinous crime that took the lives of nearly 200 innocent men, women and children in Oklahoma City has laid bare a political crisis in the United States long in the making. It has exposed the growing instability of American bourgeois democracy and revealed the degree to which its traditional institutions are being undermined by deep-going social antagonisms.”

The Republican-engineered shutdown of the federal government only a few months after the bombing, the impeachment coup against Clinton, the theft of the 2000 presidential election, and Monday's degrading spectacle itself—all testify to the prescience of that analysis.

More than anything else, the *New York Times* editorial bespeaks an extraordinary fear that the American people might believe the existing social system bears some responsibility for what happened in Oklahoma City. Most striking—and most damning—is the insistence that from a tragedy as great as the Oklahoma City bombing, there is nothing to be learned. Such a view reflects the outlook of a crisis-ridden political elite that dares not look honestly at social reality because it fears what it will see.

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