

Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh: the making of a mass murderer

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Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, is scheduled to die May 16 by lethal injection at a federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana. On April 19, 1995, McVeigh detonated a seven-ton truck bomb outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building that killed 168 people, including 19 children, in the deadliest act of terrorism ever committed on US soil.

The impending execution has once again raised issues surrounding the bombing and the figure of McVeigh himself. Various commentaries have appeared in the media, most of them superficial in the extreme. As a rule, they go no farther than discussing McVeigh's subjective motives, and generally reach the conclusion that he is nothing more than a monstrous aberration, whose emergence is not related to broader social questions.

Approaching McVeigh in this manner is not only inadequate, it is an evasion. To grasp the Oklahoma City tragedy and the character of its perpetrator requires seriously examining and coming to grips with some ugly truths about American society.

The most striking and immediate aspect of McVeigh and the atrocity he committed is something official commentators pass over in virtual silence—the intense alienation from society and its official establishment that he exhibits. What accounts for such a level of alienation, and the anti-social form it has assumed in the figure of McVeigh? What is the socio-psychological process that transformed a working class youth into an unrepentant mass murderer?

McVeigh's cold-blooded act horrified millions in the US and around the world. But a recently published book, *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing* by two *Buffalo News* reporters, Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, reports that McVeigh has no regrets about his act. He openly acknowledged having set off the bomb to the authors and claims sole responsibility for the mass killing. During an appearance on ABC News's "Prime Time Thursday" March 29, Herbeck commented, "He [McVeigh] never expressed one ounce of remorse for the Oklahoma City bombing." Michel described McVeigh's reaction to the explosion's aftermath: "Damn, I didn't knock the building down. I didn't take it down."

According to Michel and Herbeck, McVeigh claimed not to have known that a day-care center was located in the Murrah Building, and that if he had known it, in his own words, "it might have given me pause to switch targets. That's a large amount of collateral damage."

Michel and Herbeck quote McVeigh, with whom they spoke for some 75 hours, on his attitude to the victims: "To these people in Oklahoma who have lost a loved one, I'm sorry but it happens every day. You're not the first mother to lose a kid, or the first grandparent to lose a grandson or a granddaughter. It happens every day, somewhere in the world. I'm not going to go into that courtroom, curl into a fetal ball, and cry just because the victims want me to do that."

McVeigh's lack of remorse for the deaths of 19 children, as well as secretaries, clerks, administrators and others employed by the federal government, and the dozens of people who were merely visiting the building, should serve as a warning about the character of elements

promoted by the ultra-right in the US. They are brutal, cowardly and ruthless.

While *American Terrorist* contains some valuable material, it provides little insight into the social source of McVeigh's act. Indeed Michel and Herbeck end their work on the following note: "The same imponderable question haunts those who lost sons, daughters, spouses, friends, and other loved ones when America's long-simmering tensions over gun rights and big government exploded in Oklahoma City. *Why?*" This amounts to an admission of failure on the part of authors who, by all rights, should have dedicated their 388-page book to answering that very question.

One would certainly not go to the house-organ of liberal complacency, the *New York Times*, for an explanation of "*Why?*" The *Times*, in a March 30 editorial, denounces McVeigh without making any effort to explain the conditions that produced him. The newspaper's editorial asserts that the Oklahoma City bomber's comments reveal "a mind warped by self-induced militancy and by a detached, phony objective language of profit and loss." The editorial writers of the *Times* imply there are no social circumstances in the US that would justify militant opposition to the status quo, from any quarter, left or right. The editorial absolves American society; McVeigh, according to the logic of the *Times*, in no way reflects on the social and political order as a whole.

Human beings, however, are social creatures and develop their personalities and psyches as members of a particular society under definite historical conditions. Their essence is the composite of their social relationships. Individuality lies in the specific and unique manner in which a man or woman reflects and refracts a variety of social and historical processes.

The growth of the extreme right in the US, a process that has had semi-official sponsorship over a period of decades, made it virtually inevitable that *someone* would carry out an atrocious act like the Oklahoma City bombing. For Timothy McVeigh to turn out to be that someone, many things in his life had to fall into place.

Two social processes come together in the life experience of Timothy McVeigh—economic blight and political reaction.

McVeigh was born in April 1968 in Lockport, a town of some 23,000 in western New York state, 20 miles northeast of Buffalo and 15 miles east of Niagara Falls. Lockport is cut in half by the Erie Canal, from whose locks the town gets its name.

The Buffalo area was a major business and industrial center by the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1910 Henry Harrison began making automotive radiators in a small shop in Lockport. By 1920 Harrison Radiator was a division of General Motors and remained one until 1995, when Harrison Thermal Systems was spun off to Delphi Automotive Systems. Harrison remains the largest employer in Lockport. Both Timothy McVeigh's grandfather (30 years) and father (36 years) worked at the Harrison plant.

By the late 1970s the state of western New York's economy and the automobile and steel industries that formed its backbone had begun to

worsen dramatically. Harrison stopped hiring in 1979. The steel mills in the Buffalo area were decimated in the early 1980s by slump and international competition. The city and region entered into a spiral of decline.

As a 1995 *Washington Post* profile noted: “McVeigh’s teens coincided with the most traumatic economic times since the Depression. Buffalo’s experience was typical of the Rust Belt. Major blue-collar employers—auto and steel—shut down or downsized dramatically. Two major banks failed, throwing thousands of white-collar workers out of jobs and causing downturns in real estate, advertising, law and other fields.”

On the same day in early April 2001 that the *Buffalo News* published the third and final excerpt of Michel and Herbeck’s book on McVeigh, it carried an article reporting that the Buffalo Niagara region had “lost a bigger share of its population during the 1990s than any major metropolitan area in the nation,” according to an analysis of the recently-released 2000 census figures. The decline dropped Buffalo-Niagara from the thirty-fourth to the forty-third largest metropolitan region in the US.

Economic decay has been accompanied over the last quarter century by a growth of social inequality that has increasingly split American society into two worlds: a small, fabulously wealthy elite and the vast bulk of the population, either struggling to get by or living in outright poverty. This has been as true in the Buffalo area as everywhere else. A few suburbs have flourished, while the inner city has decayed and once relatively stable working class communities have deteriorated.

Decay and social polarization, however, cannot entirely explain Timothy McVeigh’s evolution. Why did the discontent in the late 1980s and early 1990s primarily take the form of the growth of right-wing militia-type movements? Why was there not a growing movement against capitalism? Why did McVeigh’s own disaffection take a right-wing direction?

McVeigh came to maturity during the years of the Reagan presidency, a period characterized by a relentless attack on the living standards and gains of the working class and an equally ferocious assault by right-wing ideologues against every current of progressive social thought. Anticommunism, directed against the “Evil Empire” of the Soviet Union, militarism, racism, national chauvinism, religious bigotry and fanaticism, conformism and a general intellectual deadening—every form of reaction flourished. This had its consequences.

In McVeigh’s case, the barrage of right-wing propaganda apparently combined with an emotional vulnerability—his parents’ marriage began to break up when he was 11; he was slightly built and bullied in school—to form a particular kind of paranoid adolescent personality.

From an early age, he was obsessed with survivalism. At 14 (1983) he was stockpiling food, camping equipment and weapons “in case of a nuclear attack or the communists taking over the country,” according to a neighbor. Accounts of the tribulations endured during the gas shortage of 1973-74, plus his own experience during the great blizzard of 1977, when Buffalo was virtually shut down and large numbers of people were left without means of transportation, helped convince McVeigh that individuals had to learn to fend for themselves.

According to Michel and Herbeck, he read gun magazines voraciously and ordered books from advertisements on their pages. “One that captivated him was a volume entitled *To Ride, Shoot Straight and Speak the Truth*, by Jeff Cooper, a military man and a world-renowned expert on self-defense. ... *The Turner Diaries* was another book that hit a nerve. The novel by former American Nazi Party official William L. Pierce (under the pen name Andrew McDonald) had become a kind of bible for a loose movement of gun collectors, militia groups, and government protesters after its publication in 1978.” The book’s narrative “is sympathetic to Adolf Hitler, suggests that blacks and Jews are inherently evil, and advocates killing them.”

Apocalyptic and anticommunist Hollywood films also captivated McVeigh, including *The Omega Man*, *Logan’s Run*, the *Planet of the Apes*

series and especially the 1983 Cold War screed *Red Dawn* (directed by right-winger John Milius)—about a group of small-town teenagers who become guerrilla fighters when “communists” invade the US—which he rented four times. He also favored militaristic fantasies like *First Blood*, the first of the Rambo films, and *Missing in Action*, in which Chuck Norris rescues American prisoners of war. McVeigh began collecting guns and firing them, going so far as to purchase a 10-acre piece of property in southwestern New York with a friend where they could fire their weapons in peace.

During the 1980s right-wing politicians and media types stirred up racism, often couched in attacks on “welfare cheats” and the like. McVeigh grew up in a lily-white community where, according to Michel and Herbeck, “brown and black faces were about as common as Martians.” After a brief stint at a two-year business college—he scored high on mathematical aptitude tests and had an early interest in computers and the Internet—McVeigh went to work for an armored car service in Buffalo. He got his first exposure “to racism during those armored-car runs through the city. On runs to check-cashing shops on the East Side of Buffalo, his white co-workers spared little sympathy for the shop’s heavily minority clientele and the minorities who lived in the area.”

McVeigh’s unhappy or distorted relations with women helped fuel his rage. His mother took the active role in breaking up his parents’ marriage and left her son behind with her husband. McVeigh apparently developed a wider resentment. According to Michel and Herbeck, in interviews McVeigh “would also lash out—repeatedly and emotionally—at the concept of working mothers and two-income families, which he considered a major cause of problems in American society. ‘In the past thirty years, because of the women’s movement, they’ve taken an influence out of the household,’” he told the reporters.

(It can hardly have failed to occur to McVeigh that an explosion in an office building during working hours would be likely to kill or injure mostly female employees, which, in fact, his bomb did.)

Reading about his life, one wonders if McVeigh—and his experience was hardly unique—ever encountered a single left-wing or socialist idea during his entire youth. No one is born to be a right-wing terrorist. But the social, intellectual and psychological circumstances of McVeigh’s upbringing mitigated against his inchoate discontent finding a progressive channel.

The unrelenting character of the right-wing propaganda in the 1980s and early 1990s was only made possible by the advanced state of decay of American liberalism and the Democratic Party. “Reaganism” was, in fact, a bipartisan policy; the Democrats, who controlled Congress, were fully complicit in the attacks on the working class. They either openly joined in the chorus of attacks on the poor or adapted themselves to them. In cities like Buffalo, Democrats participated in cutting budgets and social services. Not wanting to be outdone by Reagan and his cohorts, Democratic Party politicians took every opportunity to promote anticommunism and militarism. Figures like Bill Clinton, a governor of a small, “right-to-work” Southern state, were promoted by the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, which by the 1990s became the dominant force within the party.

During these years the Democratic Party abandoned the policies of social reform identified with the Great Society and the War on Poverty of the early 1960s (which themselves were of an extremely limited character), and generally repudiated any form of “income redistribution” to lessen economic inequality and improve the conditions of broad masses of people. The Democrats, basing themselves on an ever more narrow social base, turned to fiscal conservatism, catering more and more directly to big business, and to identity politics, appealing to the more privileged layers of blacks and other minorities.

It is worth noting in this context that McVeigh became even more susceptible to the propaganda of the right when, following his army service, he scored high on civil service exams for both the state and

federal governments and failed to land jobs because, he believed, of affirmative action programs favoring black applicants.

One feature of Michel and Herbeck's book that jumps out at the reader is the absence of a single reference to the unions and, in particular, to the United Auto Workers. UAW Local 686 at Harrison Radiator was formed in 1943. The *Washington Post* depicts McVeigh's father, Bill, as "a registered Democrat and union man who on a recent afternoon sported a black nylon United Auto Workers windbreaker and baseball cap."

It is a damning indictment of the AFL-CIO unions that right-wing militia groups emerged in industrial states where years of layoffs, carried out with the complicity of the unions, had devastated the working class.

The UAW, to which members of the McVeigh family had been paying dues for 52 years by the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, had long ceased to represent a progressive social force. Corporatism was now its official policy, and union leaders had intervened for years to help impose wage cuts and other concessions as agents of the auto companies. The UAW and United Steelworkers had been at the forefront of the chauvinist frenzy during the 1980s, with their anti-Japanese campaigns. In towns like Lockport they played a deeply reactionary social role.

Local 686, with approximately 9,700 "active and retired members," according to a column in the UAW's *Solidarity* magazine, continues to promote chauvinism (although the Harrison Thermal Division makes parts for every major European, Japanese and Korean auto manufacturer), sponsoring "a Buy American weekend each year and ... staunchly promoting American- and union-made products."

In May 1988, after six months of the armored car job and seeing no future for himself in Buffalo, McVeigh, just turned 20, joined the US Army. Along with the other recruits, he underwent a process of brutalization in the military.

Michel and Herbeck comment: "During dawn runs and their long, exhausting marches over the Georgia sand, their sound-offs revolved around killing and mutilating the enemy, or violent sex with women. 'Blood makes the grass grow!' recruits were taught to chant. 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' 'I can't hear you!' barked the sergeant. 'Blood makes the grass grow! Kill! Kill! Kill!'"

McVeigh continued to develop and promulgate his right-wing views in the army. It was here he met Terry Nichols, his fellow conspirator in the Oklahoma City bombing. McVeigh ran into difficulty with his evident racism in the army, when he was accused, as a sergeant, of assigning blacks to the worst jobs.

His love of the army and its discipline conflicted with his views of the US government as oppressive and representative of the New World Order, stalking horse for a UN-dominated world government and so on. The experience of the Persian Gulf War, during which he operated a Bradley fighting vehicle, apparently deepened his misgivings about the role of the US military.

McVeigh, a crack shot, was gung-ho about the war when it began in February 1991. However, Michel and Herbeck write: "The American soldiers pictured their adversaries as bloodthirsty zealots, slashing throats and firing chemical weapons. Instead they found a bedraggled horde of Iraqis, poorly trained, organized, and equipped.... McVeigh felt as if he were one of the bullies, one of a type he had reviled since childhood."

McVeigh left the army in late 1991, embittered with the military and the US government. He expected that some employer would be happy to employ a Gulf War hero. Michel-Herbeck comment: "But it didn't work out that way. Western New York, its economy still struggling as it had been when he went off to the Army, didn't have much to offer McVeigh—a realization that hit him hard. The next thirteen months back in Pendleton [where his father had moved from Lockport] would turn out to be the most disappointing time of his life, and it would drive him into a deep depression."

McVeigh obtained a job as a security guard for Burns Security. He

began writing letters to local newspapers and politicians, expressing his right-wing, populist views. Here is a typical confused passage:

"Racism on the rise? You had better believe it. Is this America's frustrations venting themselves? Is it a valid frustration? Who is to blame for the mess? At a point when the world has seen communism falter as an imperfect system to manage people, democracy seems to be headed down the same road. No one is seeing the 'big' picture.

"Maybe we have to combine ideologies to achieve the perfect utopian government. Remember, government-sponsored health care was a communist idea. Should only the rich be allowed to live longer? Does that say that because a person is poor he is a lesser human being and doesn't deserve to live as long, because he doesn't wear a tie to work?"

He added ominously: "Is civil war imminent? Do we have to shed blood to reform the current system?"

The events at Ruby Ridge in August 1992, during which a FBI sniper shot and killed the wife of a white supremacist in Idaho, hardened McVeigh's resolve. The massacre of the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas—the site of which McVeigh had visited earlier in the siege—on April 19, 1993 by federal law enforcement forces helped to send him over the edge. Now dividing his time between Arizona, Michigan and western New York, McVeigh began associating with militia groups and producing pamphlets of his own. In a letter to an ex-friend in July 1994 he wrote: "Blood will flow in the streets, Steve. Good vs. Evil. Free Men vs. Socialist Wannabe Slaves. Pray it is not your blood, my friend."

By the autumn of 1994 McVeigh had apparently decided to blow up a federal building. He claims that Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier, both of whom were charged in the crime, were his only accomplices. This seems dubious. McVeigh by this time had connections throughout the extreme right-wing underworld and it is known that before the bombing he called a number of fascist and racist organizations in search of a prospective hideout.

McVeigh justified his bombing, now set for the second anniversary of the Waco massacre—April 19, 1995—on military and tactical grounds. Michel and Herbeck note: "The Army had been his teacher in the horrors of war.... 'You learn how to handle killing in the military,' he explained. 'I face the consequences, but you learn to accept it.'

"It was the same tactic the American government used in armed international conflicts, when it wanted to send a message to tyrants and despots. It was the United States government that had ushered in this new anything-goes mentality, McVeigh believed, and he intended to show the world what it would be like to fight a war under these new rules, right in the federal government's own backyard."

McVeigh was shaped, and warped, in a very direct way by both the internal and external sides of the deepening crisis of American capitalism—the growth of social inequality and political reaction at home, and the eruption of American militarism abroad.

Michel and Herbeck are incapable of explaining, even defining, McVeigh's political outlook. Concerning the period following McVeigh's graduation from high school, they write: "For the first time in his life, Tim was reading widely, and really beginning to think about himself and his place in the world. He knew he loved guns, the outdoors, and heading off in his car to explore things. And it must have been around this time that he fixed upon the idea of freedom—as his guiding principle, as the value he loved most of all."

"Freedom" is sympathetically identified here with McVeigh's extreme individualist and even misanthropic sentiments; it is divorced from the project of liberating humanity from economic and social oppression. Because of their own political blindness, Michel and Herbeck come dangerously close to offering an apology for McVeigh and his actions in this passage and others. The authors confuse their subject's social dissatisfaction with the anti-social and reactionary means he found of expressing it.

Michel and Herbeck paint a picture of McVeigh's ultra-right conceptions, but they are incapable of going beyond characterizing his politics as “anti-government,” making no distinction between right-wing and left-wing opposition to the status quo.

McVeigh opposed the federal government for its intrusions and repressions, but he largely saw it not as the representative of an exploiting elite, but as the embodiment of collective versus individual activity. And he identified the federal government as the defender of minorities, women and others who, he believed, were eating away at his perceived status as a white male.

McVeigh's act of mass terror heralded the emergence of a fascist tendency in the US. As the statement printed in the May 8, 1995 issue of the *International Workers Bulletin* (predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*), which we are posting today, explained: “The bombing was a conscious political act. From the standpoint of the fascists who carried it out, their present lack of popular support was all the more reason for an outrage of huge proportions. It was their way of announcing their arrival on the political scene.”

“Fascist” is not simply an epithet. The appeal of ultra-right militia movements in the US is attributable, in the first place, to the worsening of economic conditions that have thrown wide layers of the population off balance, deeply alienating many. A small minority of disoriented middle-class and working class elements have evolved an opposition to the status quo that rejects parliamentary-democratic norms and embraces what it conceives to be “revolutionary” means, i.e., terrorism.

Fascism finds its ideological sources in the filth thrown up by decaying bourgeois society: racism, anti-Semitism, the cult of guns and violence. The authors of *American Terrorist* flatter McVeigh when they attempt to make a coherent ideology out of the hodgepodge that he puts forth. While endowed with native intelligence, McVeigh holds political notions that are at best banal and confused—a mix of slogans about the Second Amendment (the right to bear arms), a few phrases about the dangers of “One World Government” and the “New World Order,” racist “White Power” prejudices, inchoate populist nostrums, and so on.

The confused ideology reflects the internally contradictory position of the militia and “Patriot” movements. Certain sections of the petty bourgeoisie—from the ranks of small businessmen, middle managers, civil servants, professional employees—particularly in the decaying industrial states, and disoriented, disaffected working class youth like McVeigh, deprived of a relatively secure life in the factory by economic dislocation, come together out of desperation and frustration. In the final analysis, fascism involves the whipping up of the disoriented petty bourgeoisie against the working class in the interests of big capital.

In essence, fascism is the politics of regression and despair. McVeigh came to see himself as a “soldier” in a crusade, and an inevitable martyr. He acted in revenge for the Waco massacre and other crimes of the US government, but with little real hope that his act would spark a popular uprising. He was deeply pessimistic; indeed, according to the interviews conducted with Michel and Herbeck, he contemplated suicide on a number of occasions. He suggested that he knew he would be caught and eventually executed, and referred to the bombing as “state-assisted suicide.”

Timothy McVeigh is the product of a political and social malaise, bound up with the decay of American capitalist society. As conditions for masses of people worsened in the late 1980s and early 1990s and a social chasm yawned, the political establishment was shifting sharply to the right, encouraging the growth of ultra-right forces.

The Democratic Party was repudiating its own history of social reformism and any consideration of the needs of working people. The putrefaction of the trade unions had reached an advanced stage. This coincided with the more general, international collapse of the traditional labor organizations, which found its highest expression in the demise of

the Soviet Union. Triumphant reaction encountered a working class betrayed and politically disoriented, and therefore unable to mount any serious resistance.

At the same time these processes were working away at the foundations of American bourgeois democratic institutions. The semi-fascist organizations with which McVeigh had associations were finding an increasingly sympathetic ear within the extreme right of the Republican Party. By the time of the Oklahoma City bombing, many state and federal Republican legislators had close ties to militia organizations and other fascistic and racist political outfits. There is a continuum that extends from these circles to the top echelons of the Republican Party.

It was revealed in December 1998 that Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi and Congressman Bob Barr—a Clinton impeachment zealot—had addressed gatherings of the Council of Conservative Citizens, the direct organizational successor of the Citizens Councils that organized segregationist forces in the 1950s and 1960s, serving as a more respectable ally of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Democratic Party has adapted itself to this process. It proved incapable of seriously opposing either the anti-Clinton impeachment drive or the successful effort by the Bush forces to hijack the 2000 presidential election.

There is an urgent need to draw the lessons of the Oklahoma City bombing and McVeigh's evolution. There are many signs today that the acute contradictions of American society are beginning to break through the surface of political reaction. What shape this process takes will very much depend on the political education and preparation of the forces now coming into struggle.

The American working class faces the task of freeing itself from the grip of the Democratic Party and the semi-corpse of liberalism and establishing its political independence. By placing itself firmly on the basis of a socialist program and demonstrating its determination to break the stranglehold of the financial and corporate elite over society, such a workers movement will appeal to the broadest layers, including many sections of the middle class, opening the way for a new social order based on genuine democracy and equality.



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