

Former Klansman convicted in deadly 1963 bombing of Birmingham, Alabama church

Kate Randall
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Former Ku Klux Klansman Thomas Blanton, 62, was convicted of four counts of first-degree murder Tuesday, May 1 in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, which left four young girls dead and injured another 22 adults and children. A jury of eight whites and four blacks took only two-and-a-half hours to convict Blanton, who was immediately sentenced to four life terms.

The September 15, 1963 blast took the lives of Denise McNair, 11, and Cynthia Wesley, Carole Rosamond Robertson and Addie Mae Collins, all 14. The bomb, apparently planted under the church steps the night before, detonated at 10:19 a.m. as the children were assembling for closing prayers following Sunday school classes. The four girls were in the church basement when the blast occurred and their bodies were found underneath the rubble—mangled by the explosion's impact. Some 400 people, including 80 children, were at the church at the time, and many were injured by flying glass as the blast blew out the building's windows.

The trial in Blanton's case began in Birmingham on April 24 of this year, nearly 38 years after the bombing. At the trial's conclusion last Tuesday, the jury foreperson, an unidentified black woman, wept as she read out the verdicts—one for each of the four schoolgirls. Chris and Maxine McNair, parents of victim Denise McNair, held each other as the verdict was read and then left the courtroom without comment. Alpha Robertson, 82, the mother of Carole Robertson, sat in a wheelchair in the court's front row for closing arguments and the reading of the verdict. She commented after the trial that she was “very happy that justice came down.” “I didn't know if it would come in my lifetime,” she told reporters.

The bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church was the twenty-first in Birmingham in eight years and the third in only 11 days, following federal orders to integrate the city's public schools. These racially motivated bomb blasts struck the businesses, homes and churches of area blacks, earning the city the nickname “Bombingham.” Civil rights leader

Martin Luther King Jr. cited Birmingham as a “symbol of hardcore resistance to integration,” and it is well known that the Eastview Klavern 13 chapter of the Ku Klux Klan was behind the bombings. Local law enforcement officials were also implicated in the racist violence, with civil rights leaders estimating that at least a third of the Birmingham Police Department's officers were KKK members or sympathizers.

As early as 1964, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had identified four men in the 1963 bombing at the 16th Street Baptist Church, the center of civil rights activity in the city at the time. FBI informants in the KKK named four men who planted the bomb at the church. In a May 13, 1965 memorandum to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, local agents wrote: “The bombing was the handiwork of former Klansmen Robert E. Chambliss, Bobby Frank Cherry, Herman Frank Cash and Thomas E. Blanton, Jr.” Robert Chambliss was a notorious racist in the area known as “Dynamite Bob.”

However, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, a fervent opponent of the civil rights movement, blocked the prosecution of the four men, and eventually shut down the investigation in 1968 without filing charges. It has now become clear that the FBI not only impeded the arrest and prosecution of the four suspected men, but for years withheld incriminating evidence from state prosecutors that would have provided overwhelming evidence of their guilt. Thomas Blanton remained a free man for close to four decades following the crime because the FBI kept secret tape recordings in which he openly spoke of his role in the Klan's bombing activities.

While Chambliss, Cherry, Cash and Blanton eluded prosecution, the FBI maintained its network of agents inside the Birmingham KKK. One of the most notorious of these agents was Gary T. Rowe, who later admitted his involvement in violent assaults on blacks. Robert Chambliss was Rowe's superior in the Klan. Rowe later told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that the FBI knew and condoned of his activities. Rowe admitted to taking part in

the 1961 attack on Freedom Riders at the Birmingham bus station in 1961; shooting and killing an unidentified black man in a riot in Birmingham in 1963; and being involved in the 1965 murder of Viola Liuzzo, a 39-year-old civil rights activist from Detroit.

In 1980 the Justice Department admitted that the FBI had known about Rowe's involvement in these racially motivated attacks, but claimed they had no evidence to link him to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. Charges circulated for years that Rowe had failed a lie detector test about the 1963 bomb attack. If Rowe was not a direct participant in the bombing, he more than likely was aware that such an attack was about to take place and would have informed his FBI handlers, who did nothing to avert it.

Shortly after taking office in January 1971, Alabama Attorney General Bill Baxley reopened an investigation into the bombing, identifying Chambliss, Blanton and Cherry as the principal suspects. In a May 3 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Baxley wrote, "Soon it became clear these men could not be prosecuted without assistance from the F.B.I.. For several years, I requested, demanded and begged the F.B.I. for evidence." The FBI repeatedly rebuffed Baxley's requests. It was only after he and *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jack Nelson visited officials at the Justice Department and threatened to make public the FBI's refusal to cooperate that the FBI agreed to turn over evidence in the case. This evidence, however, did not include the tape recordings and Baxley was not even aware of their existence.

In 1977, Alabama finally brought Robert Chambliss to trial and convicted him of the murders. He was sentenced to a life term and died in prison in 1985. However, the state lacked sufficient evidence to indict Blanton and Cherry, who again evaded prosecution. Suspect Herman Cash died in 1994, never having been charged in the crime.

In 1996 the FBI officially reopened the case, leading to Thomas Blanton's and Bobby Cherry's indictment by a state grand jury on four counts each of first-degree and reckless murder in May 2000. Cherry was subsequently ruled mentally incompetent to stand trial, but the prosecution has requested a new psychiatric evaluation. It was only in 1997 that existence of the tapes became public knowledge. Bill Baxley wrote in the *Times*, "I was astonished to learn that the F.B.I. had tapes recordings of Mr. Blanton from the 1960's that incriminated both of them. I was also livid."

At Blanton's recent trial, it was these recordings that provided the key evidence leading to his conviction. One recording made by the FBI in 1964 with a microphone planted in Blanton's kitchen captures him telling his wife about a KKK meeting "when we planned the bomb." Another tape made by a friend of Blanton—a Klansman-turned-FBI informant—records Blanton speaking in

generalities about bombings. While not admitting specifically to the attack on the 16th Street Baptist Church, he says at one point: "They ain't gonna catch me when I bomb my next church."

Although all the evidence presented by the prosecution was circumstantial—and came close to 38 years after the crime—it was nonetheless compelling. Waylene Vaughn, a former girlfriend of Blanton, testified that he took her on joy rides in which he tried to run down blacks, and that he poured acid on the car seats of blacks as they shopped in a local grocery store. She said she attended KKK rallies and a Klan Christmas party with Blanton. Following the bombing of a black person's house in the months before the church bombing, Vaughn quoted Blanton as saying, "They should kill more of 'em."

The jury also heard testimony from James Lay, a black former civil defense worker who in 1963 had identified Blanton's photo as one of two men he saw in the pre-dawn darkness two weeks before the bombing, casing the spot where the bomb was ultimately detonated at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Lay said he called the Birmingham police, who arrived minutes later and "told me I hadn't seen a damned thing."

The defense was also able to cast doubt on Blanton's alibi for the two nights before the bombing, when the bomb would have been planted, although several witnesses presented conflicting testimony. Defense attorney John C. Robbins presented only two witnesses, but has indicated he will appeal the verdict, citing the inability of his client to receive a fair trial in Birmingham and the questionable admissibility of the tape recordings.

The jury's return of a swift verdict in the case is indicative of the changes in demographics and racial attitudes in Birmingham and the South in the four decades since the horrendous crime at the 16th Street Baptist Church. The case was one of 18 racist killings from the South's civil rights era that have been reinvestigated since 1989 that have resulted in six other convictions.

While the Birmingham trial has convicted one of the racist bombers, it has at the same time exposed the role of the FBI in blocking a resolution of the case for decades, withholding key evidence which allowed Thomas Blanton and Bobby Cherry to remain free of any charges in the crime for close to 38 years.



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