

Why the government's rush to execute Timothy McVeigh?

Kate Randall
26 May 2001

The US government has been forced to delay the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh following the revelation that the Federal Bureau of Investigation withheld more than 3,100 pages of documents from his defense team. Attorney General John Ashcroft announced on May 11 that McVeigh's lethal injection, originally set for May 16 in Terre Haute, Indiana, had been rescheduled for June 11.

In the aftermath of the announcement, Ashcroft, President Bush, FBI Director Louis Freeh and other government officials have repeatedly insisted that there is nothing in the documents that could affect McVeigh's legal position. Ashcroft and Bush have stated there will be no further delays in carrying out his execution. They have maintained this position despite the fact that additional documents have been discovered since Ashcroft's initial acknowledgment of withheld material.

Only last Thursday Ashcroft announced that a final search at FBI offices had turned up an additional 898 pages of documents. But the attorney general reiterated that the government would fight any attempt by McVeigh's attorneys to seek a delay in the execution.

The government maintains that the documents were withheld from McVeigh's defense as a result of an organizational foul-up by the FBI. There was no intention to deprive the defense lawyers of the material, officials insist.

There is no reason to uncritically accept this explanation as the truth. But even if the documents were withheld inadvertently, the fact remains that federal authorities failed to provide the defense with a huge volume of evidence that bears directly on the FBI investigation into the bombing. This is a serious violation of a defendant's right to a fair trial, and the violation is compounded by the fact that it concerns a capital case. It constitutes legal grounds for contesting either McVeigh's original trial, the penalty phase, or both.

Given the mass of documents involved, and the fact that the defendant is facing the death penalty, limiting the extension to 30 days is a travesty of due process. There is no way McVeigh's lawyers can study the documents, let alone adequately investigate issues arising from them, in such a short period.

Furthermore, the repeated public statements of high government officials—echoed by the media—that there is nothing of an exculpatory nature in the material can only have the effect of prejudicing any jury that might be assembled to consider future legal proceedings, should McVeigh decide to take that path.

The question arises: why the rush to execute McVeigh?

A number of factors could be involved in the government's determination to have done with McVeigh as soon as possible. The documents may contain information that conflicts with the

government's official version of the Oklahoma City bombing, which insists that only two individuals were involved: McVeigh and his former army buddy Terry Nichols.

Does the newly unearthed evidence point to a wider conspiracy? Much of it consists of interviews and leads gathered shortly after the April 1995 blast by 46 FBI field offices concerning "John Doe No. 2," a man witnesses reported seeing at the scene of the crime.

Federal investigators subsequently dropped their search for this individual and prosecuted and convicted McVeigh and Nichols, contending the two men acted alone. While McVeigh himself has denied the existence of a "John Doe No. 2," his former attorney Stephen Jones contends that McVeigh was among a group of conspirators. Lawyers for Terry Nichols, who have filed a motion for a new trial on the basis of the withheld documents, have always claimed there was such a man and that his existence could cast doubt on Nichols' role in the crime.

The withheld evidence might also contain information damaging to the FBI or other government agencies. There is good reason to suspect that FBI informants knew more about the bombing and the events leading up to it than has been revealed.

It is well known that the FBI has many informants in the militia movement, among gun lobbyists, the Christian right, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist and extreme-right groups. There is a long history of FBI collusion in right-wing violence.

One of the most notorious examples involves the activities of FBI informant Gary T. Rowe. In 1980 the Justice Department admitted that the FBI knew of Rowe's involvement in a series of racially motivated attacks in the South during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Rowe admitted to participating in the attack on the Freedom Riders at the Birmingham bus station in 1961, as well as being in the car with the gunman who in 1965 shot and killed Viola Liuzzo, a 39-year-old civil rights activist from Detroit.

In the recent trial of former Ku Klux Klansman Thomas Blanton in Alabama it was revealed that the FBI for years withheld critical evidence concerning the 1963 Birmingham church bombing that resulted in the death of four young girls. State prosecutors were not informed until 1997 of the existence of FBI tape recordings implicating Blanton in the crime.

Charges had circulated for years that FBI informant Rowe had failed a lie detector test about the 1963 blast. If Rowe was not a direct participant in the church bombing, it is probable he knew of plans to carry out the atrocity, given his association with the KKK in Birmingham. The FBI may have withheld the evidence to protect Rowe and other informants, and to conceal its own complicity in KKK crimes.

There is another dimension to the Oklahoma City bombing that the political establishment has sought to conceal. At the federal, state and local level there are numerous political figures with close ties to the Christian right, militia groups and racist and anti-Semitic organizations—the very circles in which McVeigh moved prior to the bombing. The Republican Party in particular has close ties to such right-wing groups, and a number of Republican senators, congressmen and governors have actively solicited their support.

During the Republican impeachment drive against Clinton, it was revealed, for example, that Rep. Bob Barr (R-Georgia)—among the most ferocious anti-Clinton partisans—and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) had ties to the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist group.

Beyond these immediate questions are even more fundamental considerations. The Oklahoma City bombing raises a whole host of social and political issues that the political establishment does not want discussed. The bombing was a seminal event, revealing the profound disaffection felt by broad sections of the population with the government and the state of society in America, an alienation which in Timothy McVeigh's case took an extremely reactionary, anti-social form.

The very fact that the first large-scale terrorist action to take place on US soil was not carried out by foreign terrorists, but by an American active within right-wing extremist circles, points to the sharp divisions within American society. Elements like McVeigh—in the militia movement, the Christian right, the anti-tax movement—have been directly fostered by the political establishment, especially the Republican Party. In a political sense, establishment politicians and the media have a good measure of culpability in the Oklahoma City atrocity.

Moreover, the violence of the US government itself, both at home and abroad, is a factor in the growth of right-wing terrorist forces. There is an enormous element of hypocrisy in the sanctimonious statements of Ashcroft, Bush and others, who denounce McVeigh's act of mass murder, but support no less bloody actions by the American military and police.

According to McVeigh, two events were pivotal in convincing him that the US government was an alien and repressive force: the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and the 1993 FBI assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Volunteering as a recruit to the US Army, McVeigh was shaken by the savagery of US imperialism's one-sided onslaught against the Iraqis. Following his return from the Gulf War, the FBI attack in Waco, which resulted in the deaths of at least 85 people, including 21 children, helped push him over the edge. McVeigh chose the second anniversary of the Waco attack for the Oklahoma City bombing.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has examined in detail the socio-psychological processes that led McVeigh to carry out the most deadly act of domestic terrorism in American history. (See “Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh: the making of a mass murderer”).

McVeigh is a mass murderer who should be isolated from society at large. However, the *WSWS* opposes his execution. Capital punishment is a barbaric practice that has been outlawed in the majority of the advanced industrialized countries in the world. The American people will be no better protected by putting McVeigh to death than by locking him up for life.

But the political establishment wants to use the McVeigh execution—the first federal execution in 38 years—to rehabilitate the practice of capital punishment, which has begun to lose support

among Americans in recent years, due in part to revelations of wrongful convictions of death row inmates.

Attorney General Ashcroft has organized a viewing of the execution on closed circuit television for some 300 victims' relatives and survivors, who are to watch the grisly procedure from a remote location in Oklahoma City. The media plans to assemble a horde of journalists in Terre Haute to report live on the execution.

It is ironic that the government's handling of the Oklahoma City bombing case, including the revelations of withheld evidence, has made McVeigh's execution a focus of opposition to capital punishment. International human rights organizations, foreign governments and even the Pope are calling on the Bush administration to halt the execution. It should be noted that a number of the victims' relatives have themselves come out against the execution.

The general slant of newspaper and television reports is that McVeigh's execution is a precondition for those who survived the bombing or lost loved ones to achieve “closure.” Precisely what is meant by “closure” is never explained. If it means putting an end to the pain that comes from the loss of a husband, wife, father, mother, or child—then the term has little meaning, because people can never fully put such feelings behind them.

If it means overcoming the rage and bitterness produced by an inhuman act like McVeigh's—especially when a loved one has been killed—it is legitimate to question the notion that watching the perpetrator die is the most healthy and positive form of therapy. Surely, society can and should encourage a more humane means of dealing with such a tragedy.

In any event, the government's rush to execute McVeigh has little to do with compassion for the victims and survivors. It is a continuation of the ethos of retribution that has been used by the political establishment in recent decades to brutalize society. And the authorities hope that by killing McVeigh they will preempt any further examination of the bombing and what it revealed about American society.

It is, however, only through an examination of the social roots of this terrible event that the survivors—as well as the American people as a whole—can begin to come to grips with the tragedy. What light does McVeigh's evolution shed on the class divisions in American society and the character of the political system?

Only on the basis of an understanding of the objective social roots of the Oklahoma City bombing is it possible to make sense of what otherwise seems an inexplicable event. And only on such a basis is it possible to see how society can be changed for the better to prevent such events from recurring in the future.



To contact the *WSWS* and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact