

An exchange of letters on Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh

16 June 2001

To the editor:

Regarding David Walsh's pseudo-sophisticated analysis of Tim McVeigh ["Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh: the making of a mass murderer" <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/apr2001/mcve-a19.shtml>] ... I should be laughing, except that Walsh expects to be taken seriously and the subject is such a tragic one. I'll be interested in the next article from Walsh explaining the depraved background and social conditions that led the next socialist terrorist or government into the killing field.

McVeigh is not the "victim" of a depraved society or degraded social conditions. He's a man with an independent, free will to choose the course of his life and his actions. He could have changed his destiny at any one of a hundred or thousand moments along the path of his life. He didn't have to return to difficult economic conditions in New York after his army service: he could have moved to any of hundreds of other regions where economic conditions were booming. He could have gone to school at taxpayer expense and trained for a profitable and rewarding job in the new technological economy. He could have repented at the last moment and driven the truck into a lake somewhere. He could have repudiated the ultra-right beliefs he espoused and found personal healing. He could have...

McVeigh as victim may suit the socialist agenda. McVeigh as right-wing conspirator may suit it even better. McVeigh as disadvantaged victim of capitalist exploitation may suit it best of all—but that's all nonsense. McVeigh, human being, chose to become a mass murderer. He chose to violate his conscience. He chose to attempt to make his statement and his contribution to the world by killing 168 people who had done nothing to him personally, and didn't even make good representatives of the people and government he professes to hate.

Ultra-left and ultra-right have the same core motivator: hatred. It may be hatred of the "privileged," or hatred of the "liberals." The problem does not lie in basic social structures, as Marx and so many others have postulated. The problem lies in basic human nature and the refusal on the part of so many to repudiate that hatred and work for justice

by compassionate and fair means. Of course, it's quicker and more dramatic to blow up a building or overthrow a government. (And in Fascism's case worldwide murder 10 million people or so. Then let's not forget communism's worldwide murder count of roughly 35 million.) It is much harder to work for justice slowly through peaceful means. It takes longer and the results are sometimes less immediate. It's much harder to work within social systems. It's much harder to preserve the best of capitalism while trying to infuse the culture with the best of socialist ideas. It's easier to just be an ideologue. But 168 people would have continued living, laughing, and loving if Tim McVeigh had taken the harder path for change instead of the quicker, more violent one. More people will die if ultra-rights and ultra-lefts continue to have their way.

How about getting off the political soapbox from time to time and instead of ranting about the evils of the present society, point out the good stuff and the avenues available for possible change? How about encouraging your readers to take responsibility for their own actions and circumstances, and stop looking for someone to blame? How about taking the high road of pro-active, peaceful personal change, instead of trying to point the finger at others and learning to envy what they have achieved? How about a column clearly repudiating the path of hatred? Lambaste the right all you want, but when the left produces a Tim McVeigh by another name, don't act too surprised. Deep down, both sides are singing the same tune—and it's not a good one.

ER

Dear ER,

Your letter successfully sums up the attitude of the self-satisfied American philistine toward every social problem. According to this view, the social circumstances into which people are born make no difference. Whether an individual's parents are millionaires or poverty-stricken, he or she has the same chance in life. We are all free-floating atoms, who make our way in society as we choose. No one with a modicum of intellectual honesty can believe this type of Horatio Alger pabulum in 2001.

America is a highly stratified and class-divided society. As

we noted in our election statement last October: “At the top of American society is a possessing class richer, in terms both of wealth and income, than any in history. The richest 1 percent of American households have amassed more than \$10 trillion in wealth—10 million million dollars—about 40 percent of the total national wealth. The combined net worth of these multimillionaires is greater than the total wealth of the bottom 95 percent of the population.” At the other pole of society: “Between 1983 and 1995, the average net worth of households in the bottom 40 percent of the population declined by 80 percent, from \$4,400 to \$900. For the bottom 20 percent, net worth is below zero: their debts exceed their assets, even when home equity is included.”

We held no brief for Timothy McVeigh. We despised the ideology he espoused. But it is absurd to refuse to see the obvious—that his action was conditioned by and ultimately the product of definite economic, political, ideological and cultural trends.

If social circumstances have no effect, then why didn't this bombing take place 25 years ago, or 50? It is highly unlikely that anyone from his social or family background (auto workers in the industrial region of Buffalo, New York) would have considered such an act at either of those points in time. It took a sharp growth in social polarization and the political alienation that accompanied it, under conditions of the reactionary climate of the 1980s and 1990s, to produce a right-wing terrorist like McVeigh.

No one is absolving McVeigh of responsibility. He did make certain choices. But the fact remains that objective social conditions, including the cultivation of extreme right-wing elements by the political establishment, “...made it virtually inevitable that someone would carry out an atrocious act like the Oklahoma City bombing,” as I suggested in my April 19 article.

All your talk about the next “socialist terrorist” cannot obscure the fact that the bombing was carried out by the ultra-right and no one else. Socialists oppose individual terrorism and fight for the mass of working people to become conscious of their own social interests and collectively transform society through political means. Our “core motivator,” to borrow your phrase, is not “hatred,” but the struggle to achieve social equality and end all forms of exploitation.

“How about getting off the political soapbox from time to time and instead of ranting about the evils of the present society, point out the good stuff and the avenues available for possible change?” Here you grow remarkably vague. You fail to give examples of the “good stuff” we should point out about contemporary American capitalist society. Your vagueness, however, is understandable given the present state of affairs for the mass of the population. “Good

stuff” is largely the province of a highly privileged few.

As is typical of the kind of polemic in which you indulge, you denounce us for having a political agenda. Of course we have a political agenda, which we openly declare. That, of course, does not mean our views are merely subjective and without scientific merit. You, on the other hand, want us to believe that your anti-socialist and anti-humanist diatribe is free of politics.

You say that the “problem does not lie in basic social structures, as Marx and so many others have postulated. The problem lies in basic human nature...” Here we have the fruit of Original Sin, presumably. Man is a fallen creature. We reject such religious mystification, which in your letter functions as an apology for the status quo. The notion that it is impossible to improve society because of man's wicked nature is by no means a novel or original idea. It has been advanced for decades to demean the human race and deny its ability to change human society for the better. It has become increasingly fashionable over the past 20-plus years of official reaction. This thoroughly ahistoric and unscientific notion is not merely an attack on Marx, but an assault on the last 500 years of progressive thought.

Your outlook toward society can be compared to the notions of physics, biology and medicine that prevailed in the Dark Ages of Europe. A physician proceeding on such a basis today would be liable to criminal prosecution for medical fraud and malpractice.

It is, finally, not a coincidence your conception of human nature is marshaled to justify the thoroughly barbaric and medieval practice of capital punishment.

David Walsh



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