

Viewer Discretion Is Advised: Executing McVeigh

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Too many of us were silent at the time of the FBI attack on Waco, or the FBI killings at Ruby Ridge. Those involved were not of color, they were not radicals. They were not “part of our movements”. We should have been heard then. We need to be heard now.

— David McReynolds, “The Case of Timothy McVeigh and Capital Punishment”

We’re not here for the purpose of trying the FBI . . . Timothy McVeigh was the instrument of death and destruction.

— U.S. District Judge Richard P. Matsch, ruling (June 6, 2001)

I am sorry these people had to lose their lives. But that’s the nature of the beast. It’s understood going in what the human toll will be.

— Timothy McVeigh, letter (June 9, 2001)

Lights! Cameras! Execute!

In his gritty 1985 trilogy *A Song Called Youth* (Northbridge, CA: Babbage Press, 1999), cyberpunk author John Shirley created a disturbing vision of global audiences entranced by televised ultra-violence.

The networks’ flagship offering is the Public AntiViolence show, where viewers compete for the grand prize: the chance to execute offenders on prime-time television. There have been parallel explorations of the same theme—*Network* (1976) depicted the ‘final solution’ to a bad ratings season; *The Running Man* (1987) nailed how a dystopian police state would exert control through exploitation game-shows, and *Series 7: The Contenders* (2001) takes the Reality TV micro-trend to its logical conclusion—but only Shirley prophesied the fusion of the ‘entertainment economy’ and ‘compassionate conservatism’ that has encircled the execution of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

A Cryptic Endgame

Lit-motifs aside, McVeigh’s strange journey through the American legal system left many unanswered questions, namely, who was John Doe #2? I can’t offer any freeze-dried answers for an op-ed piece in the execution’s aftermath, only more troubling questions. Writing a psychobiography of anyone is hard, and the press has already decided on its interpretation of history. For now, the most candid source is Dan Herbeck and Lou Michel’s *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing Conspiracy* (New York: Regan Books, 2001). McVeigh spent his last days writing letters to family and the journalists who had befriended him.

The Rise of a ‘Snitch Culture’

There are broader issues that are still yet to be faced. Shortly after Oklahoma City, I did an interview with author Robert Anton Wilson, who had just renewed his American Civil Liberties Union membership, fearing that the Clinton Administration would conduct reprisals. It’s unlikely that Wilson would have been targeted, yet Fortress America endured a more pervasive and secretive outcome: the growth of Jim Redden’s “snitch culture”. What long-term effects will McVeigh’s trial have on domestic anti-terrorist efforts? Is domestic terrorism an outcome of a socio-political culture where institutions have betrayed our trust, politicians lie to our faces, and the media looks the other way?

Law and Disorder

These questions swirl around the FBI’s investigation, which has revealed troubling aspects about its institutional culture. Why did the FBI fail to disclose over 3000 documents to McVeigh’s lawyers? Whilst not changing McVeigh’s guilt, the archival and computer problems do raise concerns about *other* “prisoners of conscience” such as Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal. FBI whistleblowers are claiming “negligence.”

McVeigh refused to give FBI investigators a “final briefing” about his political views, stating: “I would hate for my insights to be used to kill more people, when they eventually abuse their power.” Perhaps McVeigh recalled “Project Megiddo”, the FBI study of militia, activist, and protest groups. He might also have been concerned with groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center, which now claims that the militia movement has dwindled from its mid-1990s peak. Or maybe he was covering up links with the Aryan Republican Army, which some investigators claim helped McVeigh and Terry Nichols with the OK-Bomb logistics.

GWS Blowback?

Would McVeigh have been so bitter about the 1991 Persian Gulf War, if he had known of the probable connection between depleted uranium shells and ‘Gulf War Syndrome’?

Faces of the Enemy

He may become a martyr, but we must not dehumanize him: McVeigh raised some disturbing questions about state-sponsored violence and the dark side of America’s geopolitical history that remain unanswered.

In a controversial *60 Minutes* interview, he asked: “What did we do to Sudan? What did we do to Afghanistan? Belgrade? What are we doing with the death penalty? It appears they [the government] use violence as an option all the time.”

In a series of letters to *Los Angeles Times* journalist Richard A. Serrano, the murderer of 168 people (including 19 children) offered his opinions on the lucrative business of defense contractors, why military generals wouldn't deploy the Peace Corps, women and the draft, and America's bomb and munitions stockpiles: "With our recent threats of force (and use of force) thru-out the world, there is a larger irony escaping notice here . . . Because the world has slowly been losing respect for the U.S.—with its decline in moral leadership and practiced hypocrisy we are left with only one foreign policy option: brute force . . ."

These are important geopolitical questions and moral problems, but they will be forever overshadowed by McVeigh's callous actions on April 19, 1995. His uncaring referral to victims as "collateral damage" generated many column inches, yet showed McVeigh to be the "ultimate soldier" of the very military-information system that molded him into a killer. Similar dehumanizing euphemisms drive PR flak and the War on Some Drugs. They reflect what Riane Eisler calls a "Dominator" society.

McVeigh's anger, paranoia and "closed" view of the world led him to create the worst act of terrorism ever on American soil. It's time we reflected on where our own views of reality may be "blinkered", and take pro-active action to maintain an "open" perspective.

State-sanctioned Violence

"The issue is not McVeigh, but whether the State should at any time take the life of a man or woman convicted of murder," argued David McReynolds, whose sentiments have been echoed, in recent months, by Oklahomans conducting prayer vigils outside government offices.

Psychologists believe that a fusion of 'vengeance' and 'justice' motivated the audience who watched McVeigh's execution on closed-circuit television. This cathartic event is unlikely to give Oklahomans 'closure', yet the very fusion of 'vengeance' and 'justice' is a step further toward the grim world that John Shirley imagined.

The More You Stream, The Less You Know

ENI has requested permission to place a Webcam in the execution chamber and to transmit the actual execution on the Internet. In order to prevent children from watching, we will request that viewers use a credit card to pay a \$1.95 fee, which will effectively eliminate minors. All of the proceeds collected will be given to charities established to benefit the families of victims of this tragedy and ENI will not benefit in any way from the fees collected.

— Entertainment Network Inc press release

The possibility that McVeigh's execution might be televised created renewed interest in America's death sentencing process. Florida-based company Entertainment Network Inc sought to Webcast the execution, ostensibly with 'public interest' and First Amendment issues in mind. Government and law enforcement officials even raised the specter of 'hacktivists' (Napster mavericks?) tempted to de-scramble the encrypted broadcast and post it to a "sociopathic Internet."

After a four-minute glitch, the encrypted broadcast went ahead, and the FBI believes that any hackers were unsuccessful.

'Total Television' and Public AntiViolence Shows: Our Future?

As an American who cares about our culture, I want to restrict a mass murderer's access to the public podium. On an issue of particular importance to me as Attorney General of the United States, I do not want anyone to be able to purchase access to the podium of America with the blood of 168 innocent victims.

— Attorney General John Ashcroft, press statement (April 12, 2001)

There is one final irony to the Para-military Opera of Timothy McVeigh that we should all heed. *Nation* scribe Tom Engelhardt proposed in a 1992 article [1] that the Gulf War was the first 'Total Television' production, the intersection of military-information 'perception management', geo-economic pressures on global television networks, and the hypnoid mass audience that had co-emerged with 'events' like the Iran Hostage Crisis and the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster. The broadcast battle over McVeigh's execution revealed that 'Total Television' has now engulfed domestic life, imperceptible from "infotainment." As Alfred Hitchcock showed with the famous "shower scene" in *Psycho* (1960), once you cross the line, no matter how imperceptibly, you can't go back.

On June 10th 2001, the Supreme Court rejected, without comment, a bid to videotape McVeigh's execution. Acting Solicitor General Barbara Underwood wrote: "In light of the ubiquitous interest in the Oklahoma City bombing, the mere creation of a videotape of McVeigh's execution would present the government with unique challenges."

The court's last-minute decision did not deter a macabre media pack from converging on Terre Haute, Indiana. The morning of McVeigh's execution, journalist Richard Tomkins estimated over 1,200 media personnel were on-hand to interview prison officials and 'spin-doctor' commentary. Tomkins summed up his revulsion at this "death circus":

"It's a circus of the absurd, "reality" TV taken as close to the max as currently allowable. The only things missing are video cams in the execution chamber, the viewing audience voting thumbs up or thumbs down and a carefully coiffed, bouncy anchor or reporter asking, "How are you feeling right now," to McVeigh as he lays on the execution gurney before they cut away to a commercial break."

The agnostic McVeigh had one final quip to the media: “If I am going to hell, I’m gonna have a lot of company.” His last message was a line from the poem *Invictus*: “I am the master of my own fate, the captain of my own soul.” He was pronounced dead at 5:14 AM, PDT.

We should remember those who died in the Alfred P. Murrah building on April 19, 1995. The “banal evil” that drove McVeigh is a potential demon-seed in all of us. We must also be ever vigilant that further injustices and violence may be perpetuated in the name of righteous “vengeance” and “justice”.

On that fateful morning in Terre Haute, Indiana, we stopped short of crossing the line.

Coda: End of Conspiracy?

“For those die-hard conspiracy theorists who will refuse to believe this, I turn the tables and say: Show me where I needed anyone else. Financing? Logistics? Specialized tech skills? Brainpower? Strategy? . . . Show me where I needed a dark, mysterious ‘Mr. X!’”

— Timothy McVeigh, letter, June 9, 2001

Endnote

[1] Tom Engelhardt. “The Gulf War As Total Television 5/11/92.” In Victor Navasky and Katrina Vanden Heuvel (ed.). *The Best of The Nation*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2000. 148-155.