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The Ethnography of Terror

Timothy McVeigh and the Blue Centerlight of Evil

Mark S. Hamm

> *I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like the fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"*
> —Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

I'm the same way. That's my first confession: I am what you might call a janitor for academic criminology. I study the people that everybody loves to hate, but on whom nobody wants to spend the time, energy, or money to figure out why they became so dangerous in the first place—men who kill their wives, Cuban "Marielitos," assassins, skinheads, Charles Manson; and corrupt public officials like Edwin Meese, or the grievously naive, like Janet Reno.[1]

In fact, more than anyone in recent years, Attorney General Reno and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have taught me to be far more worried about what government does to protect us from criminals than about the criminals themselves. The seeds of that lesson were planted in my mind some twenty years ago in a chance but truly fortunate encounter I had with Mother Teresa, who said, "I do not fear Satan half as much as I fear those who fear him." She has a point. If you study great acts of evil in this world you find that they are often perpetrated by our protectors.

Here is another confession: I know that exploring the roots of evil is not the safest of jobs. It takes time to explore these roots. It is sometimes frightening and forever lonely. Beyond that, it leads to spiritual and intellectual obsessions. Yet, to borrow a term from another semihazardous profession, there's always a gig.

So that—for better or worse—is what has led me to this dangerous, godforsaken stretch of highway running southbound down through the Black Mountains of the Mojave Desert, where Nevada meets Arizona at the Hoover Dam. Anyone who has ever traveled this hard road knows that this place is unimaginably immense.

More than a mile below me the powerful Colorado River is gouging through mountain blocks the size of the Astrodome. Above lies a moonscape of huge, black volcanic mountaintops against a pure blue sky. But that is only part of what makes this place so godforsaken. There are the winds. They have whipped across this land for five million years, blowing away every grain of sand and silt, killing everything in their path but the deformed Joshua trees and yucca plants. The winds have left behind granite, stone pebbles, and a desert varnish darkening the mountains and the sloping aprons surrounding them.

That's where I'm standing, on a silent mountainside. As the wind lashes my face, I pick up the sweet but deadly scent of a rattlesnake nest just over the cliff. I know one thing for damn sure: I am alone out here, profoundly alone, and I must be careful. I reach to my chest and feel the cross that hangs there, hoping to affirm that good will overcome evil.

While there may be something evocative about nature's evolution on this mountainside, in social terms there is also something down that ravine in front of me which illustrates just how far humankind has failed to come. I spent most of the 1970s and 1980s living in Arizona. I've hiked the bosoms of her canyons, drunk in her honky-tonks, and worked the cellblocks of her meanest prisons. I know well that this land has always drawn the strong, the outspoken, the hard-headed, and the imminently criminal. For years, this part of the Mojave has been a place where things can be stashed out of sight. Things like homicide victims, bags of robbery money, methamphetamine laboratories, and, since Janet Reno unleashed the black beast at Waco, composite materials for constructing homemade bombs.

That's what I'm searching for as I head down the ravine, past the rattlesnakes. That and the blue centerlight of evil.

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Trouble, Nothing but Trouble

Social scientists have long debated the strengths and weaknesses of ethnography as a research method.[2] While ethnography offers researchers sensitizing strategies for understanding the experiential setting of criminal and deviant behavior, ethnographic studies are often limited in their ability to provide findings that can be generalized to similar populations. Recently, however, social scientists have begun to acknowledge a more urgent problem associated with ethnography: the enormous personal toll that this method can take on the researcher, a toll that can potentially transform the research process itself.

Recent examples of such confessions can be found in studies of street gangs, the homeless, political prisoners, and people with AIDS.[3] Similar issues have also been recounted in the literature on new social movements. In her ethnographic study of civil disobedience waged by a California anti-nuclear group in Nevada, sociologist Josepha Schiffman confessed that

> Most [activists] were ecstatic at the beauty of the desert. I, on the other hand, was none too fond of the radioactive dust and the cactus thorns that pierced my shoes. . . . I reproached myself with the memory of all those researchers who troop off to face unknown dangers in hostile field sites. But as I was throwing up in a cheap Las Vegas motel . . . from drinking contaminated water, I resolved that my next participant observation project would be studying the leisure habits of the very wealthy. . . . I knew then that I had reached a turning point. . . . It was a wrenching experience, and one for which I was totally unprepared. . . . I never anticipated how much I would be affected personally by the experience of doing participant observation.[4]

Thus comes my next confession: while I have known thousands of criminals in my life and have studied hundreds of crimes, I was completely unprepared for what I would find in this ravine, and in my larger research on the Oklahoma City bombing. Put as succinctly as possible, here is what I found.[5]

Timothy McVeigh, a young methamphetamine-addicted and highly decorated veteran of the Persian Gulf War, became obsessed with what he saw as the mass murder of seventy-eight men, women, and children by the FBI at the Branch Davidian compound outside Waco, Texas, on April 19, 1993. On Easter Sunday 1995, McVeigh parked a battered yellow 1977 Mercury Marquis in a vacant lot about one hundred yards from the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and placed a cardboard sign in the windshield reading "Broken Down, Do Not Tow." Three days later, on April 19, McVeigh returned to the site in a twenty-four-foot Ryder rental truck carrying a bomb weighing more than two-and-a-half tons. Due to his methamphetamine use, McVeigh was anorexic. He stood six feet, two inches tall, yet weighed only 155 pounds. His hair was fashioned in a military crew cut; he wore black combat boots, black jeans, and a blue windbreaker over a white sweatshirt emblazoned with these words from a speech made famous by Thomas Jefferson more than two hundred years ago: *"The Tree Of Liberty Must Be Refreshed From Time To Time By The Blood Of Tyrants And Patriots."* Timothy McVeigh had come to avenge the sins of Waco.

He parked the Ryder truck across the street from the city post office, walked to the Mercury, and drove it to a parking space directly across the street from the Murrah building. Then McVeigh walked back to the Ryder, started the engine, and lit a ten-foot fuse running through a hole connecting the cab to the cargo bay and the bomb. He slowly pulled the truck in front of the federal building, shut off the engine, put the keys in his pocket, and ran to the Mercury. As he made his getaway down Interstate 235, the detonation system kicked in.

In one imperceptible instant, the bomb killed 167 men, women, and children; it grievously injured another 500. Because the truck bomb was placed directly beneath the Murrah building's day-care center, some 20 infants took the full force of the blast in their faces. They never had a chance. Their human remains—tiny arms and legs—were found a block away.

From what universe beyond the one that most of us inhabit does this kind of evil arise?

I have struggled with that question every day since the bombing; yet, I have found little guidance in the literature on domestic terrorism. To begin with, most studies of terrorism are wholly derivative of official documents and journalistic sources. As such, these studies represent

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secondhand observations of the criminal event, observations that are simply passed from one source to the next without the benefit of serious criminological inquiry. I agree with Howard S. Becker that "the basic operation in studying society is the production and refinement of an *image* of the thing we are studying."[6] No amount of secondary analysis can enhance the criminological image of McVeigh killing those babies.

In fact, most studies of terrorism ignore victims altogether.[7] Not only do such descriptions do a shameful disservice to the victims, but they also completely overlook the impact of terrorism on the community. As a consequence, we learn little about the individual suffering caused by terrorism, and even less about how a community copes with such extraordinary loss. I have vowed not to make that mistake in telling the story of the Oklahoma City bombing.

I have therefore relied on an ethnography of terror, beginning with a study of the bomb site itself. The ghastly remains of the Murrah building were demolished in May 1995, and the site was converted to a memorial. An estimated two million people have visited this memorial. I have gone there six times. Each time, I have been reduced to tears—not only by the monumental suffering that occurred on that sacred ground, but also by the remarkable strength and resilience of the people of Oklahoma City. I have used this situated ethnography to move beyond the surface examination of the bombing offered by journalists and government bureaucrats. The bombing has led to unprecedented counterterrorism legislation recently enacted by the U.S. Congress. This ethnography of terror, then, can be conceived as a deliberate attempt to honor the victims of Oklahoma City by paying attention to what Michel Foucault called "the blood that has dried on the codes of law."[8]

I have followed one simple rule in this ethnography: God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason—we should listen twice as much as we talk. I have had to ask few questions, then; simply being there is enough. While many visitors to the memorial site have been locked in their own silence, others have been more than willing to express themselves voluntarily to me. I have been especially moved by several Vietnam veterans who made pilgrimages to the memorial. McVeigh detonated his truck bomb one week before the twentieth anniversary of the fall of Saigon. In the weeks following the bombing, counselors across the nation reported that these vets experienced increased flashbacks, nightmares, and signs of "hypervigilance"—a feeling of being in constant danger. But here in this windblown ravine, I remember that perhaps the most poignant stories have come from those at life's extremes: the very old and the very young. For me, one of these stories shall always stand as an exemplar of the power and the pity of the ethnography of terror.

It's Labor Day 1996, and I'm walking through the vacant lot where McVeigh hid the Mercury. In contrast to media portrayals of the bomb site, this section of Oklahoma City is not part of an urban metropolis. Rather, it is that part of town where the muffler shops are found, where the weeds are never cut, where empty crack vials and whiskey bottles line the gutters, and where a broken-down old Mercury would go unnoticed.

Two black children approach on foot. They can't be more than eight years old. One of them, missing his two front teeth, asks me, "What you doin'?"

"I'm lookin' for where that man parked his car," I say gently. "The man that blowed up the building. You know."

"Yeah. My cousin died in there."

"Jesus, I'm sorry little man. How old was he?"

"Two."

"Two years old?"

"Yeah. It was his birfday. It's sad you gotta die on your birfday."

Just then, the second kid points toward the memorial and asks, "How'd you like to live with yourself after you did that?"

I can't answer that question down in this ravine. I've got to get out of this place; there's nothing down here anyway, except more rattlesnakes. I'm heading to Kingman, Arizona, and what will no doubt be even more trouble.

Paint It Black

The first problem, of course, is that Timothy McVeigh is no longer in Kingman. As of this writing, he sits alone in a specially designed cage in Denver awaiting execution for the worst act of terroristic mass murder in American history. I have been in contact with McVeigh, though, through his attorney, and I am currently awaiting my chance to interview him in a holding pen outside his cell. In the meantime, I am left with the task of

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Kingman is important because McVeigh lived here off and on with his former army buddy, Michael Fortier, in a brown-and-white house trailer on McVicar Avenue.[10] The two worked together for a while at the True Value hardware store on Stockton Hill Road, and later McVeigh used Kingman as his home base when he worked the southwestern gun-show circuit.

The plan to bomb the Murrah building fell into place two weeks before Christmas in 1994. That was when McVeigh and Fortier—while en route from Arizona to Council Grove, Kansas, to take possession of firearms stolen from gun dealer Roger Moore—stopped in Oklahoma City and cased the Murrah building to assess what it would take to destroy it. McVeigh believed (incorrectly) that some of the FBI agents responsible for the Waco disaster were housed there. Over the next three months, McVeigh—aided by another army buddy, Terry Nichols of Herington, Kansas—set about the task of gathering composite materials for the bomb. These materials included two tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, acetylene tanks, plastic barrels, mixing paddles, blasting caps, TNT, detonator cord, fuses, and diesel fuel. By the first week of March 1995, most of these materials were stored in Nichols's basement and in rental lockers in rural Kansas.

On March 11, McVeigh returned to Fortier's Kingman trailer. By all accounts, he was furious. Essentially, Fortier had decided that he would have nothing to do with the bombing plan, and now Nichols had backed out as well. McVeigh then began searching for a "silent brother" to help him deliver the reckoning. First he sent a message to a small group of neo-Nazis who ran a crystal methamphetamine lab in Oatman, twenty miles southwest of Kingman, asking them to join the conspiracy.

On March 23, McVeigh rented the video *Blown Away*. In this 1993 film, actor Tommy Lee Jones plays a rogue Irish terrorist named Ryan Gaerity—a lone-wolf bomber too violent for even the Irish Republican Army. After breaking out of a Northern Ireland prison with a plastic explosive, Gaerity moves to Boston where he delivers the "gift of pain" by wreaking havoc upon the police department's bomb squad as part of a long-ago vendetta associated with the Troubles. The body of the film then works along two dimensions: the protagonist's bombing of public facilities (climaxing in the attempted mass murder of thousands at a Fourth of July Boston Pops Concert) and the inability of law enforcement to do anything about it.

Meanwhile, in Hot Springs, Arkansas, Roger Moore was growing livid with the Garland County Sheriff's Department. Back on November 5, 1994, Moore had stepped out his back door to feed the ducks when he was suddenly confronted by a man wearing camouflage, a black ski mask, and gloves. In his hands were a pistol-grip shotgun and a garrote wire. The assailant bound and blindfolded Moore with duct tape and made off with 66 firearms, $8,700 in cash, bars of silver and gold, pieces of jade, and the key to a bank safety-deposit box (much of this loot was later found in a Las Vegas storage locker rented by Terry Nichols). Moore told the Garland County sheriff, in no uncertain terms, that he knew a young army vet from the gun shows who might have been involved. His name was Tim McVeigh. The reason for Moore's anger? The sheriff had failed to pursue the lead on McVeigh.

On March 25, McVeigh began to put his personal affairs, such as they were, in order. He began by writing a hurried letter to his sister, Jennifer, warning her not to write to him after April 1. "Watch what you say back to me," Tim wrote. "Because I may not get it in time, and the G-men might get it out of my [mail]box, incriminating you." The letter ended with Tim telling Jennifer to burn all his other letters to her. McVeigh then drove to a Kingman storage locker he had rented in October and loaded its contents into his 1983 Pontiac Sunbird. He drove to a rattlesnake-infested wash in the Black Mountains, where he wrapped several bundles of dynamite and more than five hundred blasting caps in an army poncho and buried it in a gravel scrub.

Four days later, with no word from the neo-Nazis in Oatman, McVeigh grew desperate for a silent brother. So he turned to Fortier's neighbor—a stocky, long-haired, twenty-eight-year-old petty criminal named Jim Rosencrans, also a methamphetamine user. McVeigh asked Rosencrans if he would be willing to drive for "14 or 20 hours" to an unspecified place and drop McVeigh off. Then Rosencrans was to go to the nearest airport and "leave the car there." For this, McVeigh offered to pay him "about $400." But Rosencrans didn't have the mettle for terrorism, and he declined the offer.

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It was then that Timothy McVeigh made his last stand. On March 31, McVeigh drove his Sunbird over to the Imperial Hotel on Route 66 in Kingman. Using his own name, but giving a Fort Riley, Kansas, address, he paid $245 for thirteen days' lodging and settled into Room 212. "I thought he was in the Reserves because of the way he came in here all dressed up in his camouflage and black boots," said the proprietor, Helmut Hofer. According to Hofer, McVeigh "stayed in the room and minded his own business" for nearly two weeks. McVeigh was on a solitary vigil; waiting, it seems, for word from someone.

Now, a little more than a year later, I have just paid Helmut Hofer $42 for two nights' lodging and have checked into Room 212 of the Imperial Hotel myself. My plan is to conduct a virtual ethnography of McVeigh's last stand. I walk across the asphalt parking lot with a bag over my shoulder, my guitar in one hand, and the room key in the other. Looking up at Room 212, I'm suddenly frozen in my tracks. Maybe I'm too absorbed in this research. Maybe I'm still shaken by the rattlesnakes back in the Black Mountains. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and look again. I can't believe what I'm seeing. There, surrounding the door frame of 212, is a black aura.

Spirit of Place: No More Kicks on Route 66

All writers have what Rudolfo Anaya calls "a room of their own," meaning that the writer's place is, for the writer, the center of the universe.[11] The center of my universe is not inside Room 212. I am merely a traveler here, collecting lumber for a story that I will write in my own room, a room not of darkness, but of light.

Because every area is inhabited by the spirits of the place, stories about that place must be guided by the soul of the community and the land. In this regard, it is unlikely that Timothy McVeigh could have acquired the emotional impetus to carry out the Oklahoma City bombing back in his hometown of Pendleton, New York. Nor could he have forged it at Terry Nichols's house in Herington, or in Waco. Those places do not possess the soul of evil required by terrorism. But that evil can be found along Route 66.

Once known as the "Main Street of America," by the time McVeigh checked into the Imperial Hotel, Route 66 had become one of the nation's darkest alleys. The stretch of Route 66 running through Kingman is desolate, primarily because of the winds, which have invested the place with what one expert on the Mojave refers to as "the bewitching allure of beauty and disaster."

The Imperial is one of those cheap, prefabricated structures of Arizona's 1970s building boom. Stepping to the door of Room 212 and looking out at the massive, black granite Haulapai Mountain Range—ragged cliffs, buzzards soaring in the blue sky—you quickly gain a sense of perspective: the feeling that you are a very small human being in a very large and brutal landscape. This creates a paradox. On one hand, there is the visible desert—the vast, incomprehensible space that kills much and sustains little. On the other, there is the desert that people perceive. It is this perceptual dimension that will evoke the true confession in any lone traveler. For the Mojave is so mighty that it defies human understanding. Rational thinking disappears and is replaced with existential fear.

You can see that fear in the eyes of the losers down on Route 66. But you have to look closely; the fear is often hidden beneath a truculent, belligerent exterior. Below the Haulapais are four cheap hotels, a tavern, the Town Restaurant, and Smith's Family Restaurant—though you'd be hard-pressed to see a family there. These establishments cater to the losers, outcasts from the fringes of American society—skinheads from California and Idaho, alcoholics, drifters, derelicts, crackheads, Elvis impersonators, and legions of truck drivers and impoverished young single women, their diapered babies walking through the broken glass of motel parking lots. Many are drawn to the place by the availability of crystal methamphetamine; other attractions are few.

Less visible is the evil of the Haulapais. It is there, at a ranch beneath Penitentiary Mountain, that it all began. McVeigh recently told a reporter from the London *Times* that he was inspired by the Arizona Patriots, a viciously racist and anti-Semitic group founded in the mid-1980s by Jack Maxwell Oliphant, the spiritual godfather of the Patriot movement. In December 1986, FBI agents from Phoenix arrested Oliphant and six confederates for plotting to hijack an armored car leaving the Laughlin, Nevada, gambling casinos. With proceeds from the robbery, the Patriots planned to blow up federal buildings in Phoenix and Los Angeles and then launch a mortar and machine-gun attack on the huge IRS complex in Ogden, Utah. Agents foiled the plan, however, sending Oliphant and several others to prison.

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Upon his parole in 1989, Oliphant returned to Penitentiary Mountain, where he raised rattlesnakes and read the Scriptures over shortwave radio. During World War II, Oliphant had broken his back in a bombing mission over Germany. At the age of seventy, he got into an argument over his rights to a gold mine in California and accidentally blew his right arm off with a shotgun. After the Oklahoma City bombing, Jack Oliphant was one of the first persons interviewed when the FBI brought several dozen agents to Kingman. I had arranged to interview the legendary one-armed old bigot while staying here at the Imperial. But three weeks before, he died. This research is nothing but trouble.

In downtown Kingman, the winds seem to have swept away any pretense of culture. There is no bookstore. There is no record store, art gallery, coffee shop, beauty parlor, or even strip joint. In fact, there are almost no people at all. It is certainly an Arizona anomaly. Unlike Phoenix, Tucson, and Flagstaff, descendants of the Pueblo Indian and the Mexican Hispano have never been allowed to assimilate into the identity of Kingman. It is, instead, a white man's town, full of white man ways.

As far as I can tell, there are only two downtown establishments that do any business. One is Heavy Metal, a weight-lifting gym. The other is Archie's Bunker, a survivalist outlet that specializes in Desert Storm cammos, assault rifles, and bomb-making manuals. Both businesses cater to angry white men juiced on steroids and crystal methamphetamine. For modern paramilitary warriors like Tim McVeigh, these places represent more than business establishments. They are cultural artifacts that form the mainstay of what Pierre Bourdieu identified as *symbolic violence.* This cultural transformation is achieved through a process that Bourdieu called *misrecognition,* or "the process whereby power relations are perceived not for what they objectively are but in a form which renders them legitimate in the eyes of the beholder."[12] In Kingman, this process of misrecognition is aided and abetted by the local political culture—a culture that marches in lockstep with the legacy of iniquity created by Jack Oliphant a decade ago out in the Haulapais.

Even the names of local politicians seem to bespeak the presence of evil. A man named Tom Thate (T-hate) is the Mohave County sheriff. Nathan Pagan is a county commissioner. But the most successful politician is Joe Hart, owner and manager of a local radio station. Hart's station broadcasts a nonstop talk show that routinely rails against President Bill Clinton ("the Slick One"), Attorney General Reno ("Butch Reno"), and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF), nicknamed "Burn All Toddlers First." Hart, a Republican, is an influential Arizona legislator. He is currently chairman of the state's powerful Public Institutions and University Committee. His primary accomplishments in this capacity have been to slash spending for higher education, to encourage gambling on Indian reservations, to draft laws that tax those gambling proceeds, and to appropriate millions of dollars for the expansion of Arizona's juvenile correctional system. Joe Hart is related by blood to Lori and Jason Hart. Lori is married to Mike Fortier, who is currently facing a twenty-five-year sentence for his part in the Oklahoma City bombing. Jason Hart is a two-bit burglar and drug dealer. It was he, in fact, who supplied Fortier and McVeigh with a constant stream of crystal methamphetamine.

The Ghost of Earl Turner

Only Timothy McVeigh knows for sure what happened inside Room 212. Evidence gathered at the time of his April 19 arrest indicates that he entered this room with a .45 Glock revolver loaded with hollow point "cop killer" bullets, a shoulder harness with several more clips of cop killers, a five-inch Buck knife, political documents about Waco, a copy of the Declaration of Independence, stories on the battles of Lexington and Concord (which took place on April 19, 1775), and selected writings of Thomas Jefferson and seventeenth-century political philosopher John Locke, who once wrote that it should be "lawful" to kill those "who would take away my liberty." Also in McVeigh's possession was a telephone calling card, some antacid tablets, a cassette player, the tape *Pretty Hate Machine* by Nine Inch Nails, and, of course, a vial of crystal meth.

It is likely that McVeigh neatly placed these items beside the telephone on the small Formica-topped writing desk that sits next to the television set. There is a flimsy plastic chair in front of the desk, which sits on a worn green carpet with several blackened cigarette burns on it. A few steps from the bed is a cramped little kitchenette and a tiny refrigerator that contains the slightest scent of disinfectant. This is where McVeigh kept his plastic bottles of Pepsi and—for those occasions when he was moved to eat—his spaghetti noodles, sauce, bread, butter, and bags of junk food. On the nightstand next to the bed, McVeigh kept several packs of Rolaids to calm the nervous, fiery backwash of tomato sauce and Pepsi. A Gideon Bible lies in the drawer. I expect to find some evidence of

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McVeigh's reading of the Book of Revelation, but the Bible has had little use. The room is completed with dingy, yellow-striped wallpaper. At several spots on that wallpaper, there is dried snot. Room 212 is a despicable place. It smells musty, foul, and strange.

I am primarily concerned with three objects in this room: the telephone, the bed, and the TV.

As late as the second week of April, McVeigh was still a loner in search of a silent brother who would somehow "emerge from the shadows" at the last minute to join the bombing conspiracy. According to the FBI, he made dozens of phone calls from Room 212, but four were especially important. The first came on April 5, when McVeigh called Elliott's Body Shop in Junction City, Kansas, to reserve the Ryder truck that would later carry the bomb. The second occurred moments later when he called a neo-Nazi commune in the remote mountains of eastern Oklahoma, looking for a German Ku Klux Klansman. The third and fourth came sometime between April 5 and April 11 when McVeigh called a message center operated by the National Alliance of Hillsboro, West Virginia. These calls were allegedly patched through to the unlisted number of the National Alliance leader, William Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries*. McVeigh had been obsessed with this book for years.

Briefly, *The Turner Diaries* is a science fiction novel about a white-supremacist guerilla force led by the book's protagonist, Earl Turner. During the 1980s, *The Turner Diaries* served as the blueprint for a reign of terror—assassinations, bank robberies, and bombings—committed by two legendary terrorist groups, the Covenant, the Sword, the Arm of the Lord and the Order. In the book, a new law dubbed the Cohen Act has invested police patrols with the power to confiscate firearms from all white Americans—an act termed the Gun Raids. *Two years to the day* after the Gun Raids, Earl Turner and his followers retaliate by driving a truck carrying a homemade bomb made of five thousand pounds of ammonium nitrate fertilizer and diesel fuel inside FBI headquarters shortly after 9:00 A.M. one morning, blowing off the front of the building, collapsing the upper floors, and killing more than seven hundred people.

While this written text is extremely important, in true white man fashion, nothing informs life in Kingman better than television. During my stay here, the fifty-unit Imperial Hotel appears to be about half full. Yet, morning, noon, or night, I rarely catch a glimpse of anyone. The residents are inside, out of the wind. McVeigh lay alone on this bed for thirteen days, presumably watching TV for hours on end. There are more than fifty programs available at any given time. These include programs carried by HBO, the Movie Channel, and Spice, a porno station. Spice was probably of little interest to McVeigh. As best as I can determine, Timothy McVeigh was a twenty-six-year-old virgin. Similar to the themes expressed on *Pretty Hate Machine,* there is a strong misogynistic streak running through McVeigh's biography.

But it is likely that the Movie Channel and HBO held his attention, day and night, while the winds wailed outside his door. These channels are designed to appeal to the interests of local viewers. From Kingman to Barstow, California, that means the constant showing of obscure B movies with distinctly antigovernment, anti-intellectual, and antifeminist motifs. The 1985 made-for-cable movie *The Park Is Mine*—starring Tommy Lee Jones as an embittered war veteran who plants explosives in a public park to draw Congressional attention to the plight of Vietnam vets—was shown twice during McVeigh's last stand in Room 212. *Sniper,* starring Tom Berenger as a U.S. Marine gunnery sergeant who assassinates a left-wing guerilla leader in Latin America, was shown four times during the period.

For two days now, I have lain in this bed, watching the movies and trying to understand what inspired McVeigh to carry on with the bombing plot when everyone else had abandoned him. This has been one of the most difficult, gut-wrenching experiences of my life. Essentially, I've been chasing the ghost of Earl Turner. And chasing ghosts, I have come to discover, is an assignment for which I am totally unprepared.

Down Where the Vultures Feed

The encroaching evil doesn't help. Yesterday, to break the monotony, I went for a run down Route 66 at sunset. Even though I ran about five miles, because of the winds I couldn't break a sweat. Add to this the bad food of this ghost-town-in-waiting, and you have some idea of how confused the body becomes. Just as I was returning to the Imperial, four white teenagers in a pickup truck pulled up beside me, and one of them shouted, "Get the fuck out of town, freak!" Quickly weighing my options, I decided to ignore them and go on my way.

That's typical of my experience in Kingman. Elijah Anderson defines a streetwise researcher as one who "neither takes the streets for granted nor recoils from them but becomes alive to dangerous situations, drawing

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on a developing repertoire of ruses and schemes for traveling the streets safely."[13] I have tried to connect with people here, hoping for an interview or two, but all my ruses and schemes have come up short. I've walked into several stores and bars, looking for someone with whom to talk, but have only been met with icy glances. That's understandable, I suppose. After the bombing, journalists from every major news organization in the world descended on Kingman, filing one negative story after another about this town. And there are still dozens of undercover FBI and ATF agents here, investigating tips on McVeigh, Fortier, and the militias. The whole town is spooked. And that has created enormous research problems.

Today I tried to catch the eye of a swastika-tattooed skinhead several doors down from Room 212. I've interviewed dozens of skinheads over the years, in the United States and abroad, and have only once found myself in what I'd call a compromising situation.[14] But this skinhead was different. He was older, about thirty, and prison-hardened; he was six feet tall and close to two hundred pounds, with massive shoulders, a tiny, angular shaved head, and eyes that were hard as mountain granite. He didn't turn those eyes away from me when I looked at him. Instead, he "bull-dogged" me—prison argot for intense staring. His eyes were filled with righteous hatred. I got the distinct impression that he wanted to kill me. I slowly returned to 212 and closed the door, breathing heavily.

Just then, I felt something wet in the center of my chest. Taking my shirt off and looking down, I see that the red pen in my shirt pocket has broken. The cross I wear is covered with red ink, dripping bloodlike onto the foul carpet of Room 212. For the first time in years, I am afraid.

Shine a Light on Me

I can almost hear the ghost of Earl Turner laughing at me. I've reached the blue centerlight of evil, and it is not a pleasant experience. It has shaken me to my core. I wash the red off my chest, lay the cross aside, pick up my guitar, and begin gently strumming a Bob Dylan song. I'm looking for something deep, some spiritual connection to get me through this awful ethnography of terror. I think of those black kids back in Oklahoma City and arrive at my truest confession.

I am not a religious man, if you think of religion in terms of suffering, sin, guilt, and redemption. But I am spiritual. And that spirituality comes from the same source that inspires my work in criminology—from the angelheaded hipsters. I would never have become a criminologist were it not for the writings of Jack Kerouac and the great musicians who put the beat in the Beat—namely Dylan and the Grateful Dead. I'm certainly not the only one whose career has been influenced by these artists. For millions of us who came of age during the sixties, these angelheaded hipsters shined a light on the path to all things beautiful and right. I looked to them for inspiration because they spoke in an accessible language about a world I recognized—something that few sociologists have ever done. It has been said that the so-called hippie generation was basically a spiritual generation. I know that to be true, and right now that's all that matters, because it is that spirituality that guides me in my struggle with the ghost of Earl Turner. Other criminologists in this situation would rely on their own particular survival skills; this is what I rely on.

The hipsters saw ghosts too. Their words and music are replete with visions of the meaninglessness of human life in the face of existential pain.[15] These visions prompted them to ask spiritual questions, often by "slumming it" among those who live outside the law—just as I'm doing now. Special reverence was accorded to these outlaws—the "desolation angels"—because they were supposedly open to revelations that the law-abiding couldn't have. Kerouac discovered these angels in the seams of a vanishing American West. And they excited his imagination, just as they did—appropriately, perhaps, for this ethnography of terror—when Kerouac first heard Bobby Troup's early fifties hit song, "Route 66" ("Get your kicks/On Route 66").

What separated the hipsters from other popular artists was the pace, the attack, and the emotion of their work. Theirs was not the voice of the detached observer. It was instead the voice of honest confession, or what Kerouac called "the song of yourself" that is written for your "own soul's ear." This led to authentic artistic creations gushing with Biblical imagery, drug-induced surrealism, street visions, playfulness, hipster talk, and—thanks to the cosmic sizzle of Jerry Garcia's guitar—a dazzling array of jazz, blues, and rock licks.

Lying at the core of this artistic Zeitgeist was an intensely spiritual longing for a personal god in the face of an intensely impersonal world. That is what I draw on now, as I sing Dylan's "Desolation Row" and fill Room 212 with the angelheaded spirits of tenderness, compassion, and the holiness of life. This momentarily heals me by confirming an ideal I have cherished for years: That it is far more important—indeed, far more noble—to be true to one's vision of goodness and beauty than to succumb to the darkness of fear and evil.

Working through my existential pain in this way has increased my commitment to telling the story of McVeigh and Oklahoma City as clearly as possible. The research has been an attempt to achieve what Buddhists call *dharma.* For me, that means the human spirit required to dig deeply into my soul in the belief that, once that far down, others will understand what I'm saying—because that far down, they and I are the same. For future generations of criminologists who must struggle with fear as I have, I therefore leave this gift from Verse 22 of Kerouac's *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity:* "Stare deep into the world before you as if it were the void: innumerable holy ghosts, buddhies, and savior gods there hide, smiling. All the atoms emitting light inside wavehood, there is no personal separation of any of it. A hummingbird can come into a house and a hawk will not: so rest and be assured. While looking for the light, you may suddenly be devoured by the darkness and find the true light."[16]

The Blue Centerlight of Evil

Ethnomethodologists refer to the sort of analysis which I am attempting in terms of *indexicality*—the interpretation of language, behavior, motives, objects, and events in a given environment.[17] To this list we can add *research danger.* For danger affects the researcher's ability to interpret language, behavior, motives, objects, and events. Here, then, from within this dangerous research, is as close as I've been able to come to explaining McVeigh and his blue centerlight of evil.

Here in Room 212, the fictional world described by William Pierce informed the delusional world of Timothy McVeigh. This is a world of paranoid conspiracies that, by their nature, defy empirical testing. They are locked and loaded mental constructs about the human struggle that face down all contradictory evidence.

At the center of all this are three important forces. The first is an interlocking of historical events that confirms the validity of the conspiracy theory. The more these events connect with one another, the greater the proof that there is a diabolical enemy to be annihilated. The second is the sense that a historical clock is ticking toward an end-time struggle. This is the omen of apocalypse, the sense that the cosmic human struggle is about to enter a new phase. And the third is cultural misrecognition brought about by the spirit of place.

In this lonely and isolated world, there is no coincidence or happenstance. Here, Waco, the American Revolution, *The Turner Diaries,* and the plot to bomb the Murrah building are connected via crystal meth to the date of April 19. To McVeigh, in his paranoia, that date was a beacon guiding him toward his chosen destiny.

In Room 212 McVeigh threw himself into martyrdom for the American radical right. This occurred at the dangerous crossroads of popular culture, paranoid politics, and the spirit of place—a crossroads where decisions are made, decisions about the link between ideas and action. From those crossroads stepped the living embodiment of Earl Turner and Ryan Gaerity, all rolled into one Pretty Hate Machine. "Tim is very, very committed to justice, whatever his definition," said Phil Morawski, an antitax protestor who knew McVeigh from the gun-show circuit. "He is the kind of person that would lay down his life for his comrades."

Yet in a sense the true disaster of this story lay not in the spirits of Room 212, the Haulapais, Archie's Bunker, Heavy Metal, or cable television. The true disaster lies at the intersection of Route 66 and Harrison Road, less than a mile north of the Imperial. There sits the Arizona Highway Patrol post. Officers from the post routinely passed McVeigh's Sunbird as it sat in front of Room 212 during his two-week stay there. The officers were able to see it as they drank coffee at the Town Restaurant. But because Arkansas law enforcement and federal authorities had failed to investigate the Roger Moore robbery, Arizona troopers were unaware of McVeigh's extraordinary criminality, and he was allowed to go free.

McVeigh checked out of Room 212 on April 12. He was now a lone wolf and the Day of the Rope was at hand. In a final spasm of meth-induced delusion, he stopped by Mike Fortier's trailer and made one final attempt to enlist the assistance of Fortier. When Mike refused, McVeigh got angry and declared that he was "going back to Kansas" to seek Terry Nichols's help in mixing the fertilizer and fuel oil. Then McVeigh headed east, toward the apocalypse in Oklahoma.

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