

Executing a Terrorist

He saw a brutal system that committed great evil, and decided that it was a legitimate tactic to take revenge in a similarly brutal manner. He killed indiscriminately. He was part of an unofficial militia that did not trust the government. He spent his life in poverty, failing at a series of occupations. He attacked a federal building, killing many civilians, and making himself widely hated.

During his trial, most reporters regarded him with contempt, but a few extremists wrote defenses of his conduct. At his execution he showed great dignity, but he did not apologize for what he did wrong, in spite of the many lives that he took in his fanatic devotion to his cause. In spite of his denials, a recent book (not widely read) demonstrated that there were others involved in this brutal crime. These other conspirators were never captured or tried, but provided him with funding, moral support, and places to stay.

No, not Timothy McVeigh, but John Brown. It has been almost 150 years since Virginia hung John Brown for his raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, and during that time, John Brown's public image has undergone a dramatic transformation. At his death, he was widely regarded as a terrorist, even a lunatic. There were pacifists such as Henry David Thoreau who wrote "A Plea for Captain John Brown," but many abolitionists understandably distanced themselves from his actions, and most Americans—who were not abolitionists at all—must have been utterly repulsed by Brown's bloody attack on the legitimate governmental authority of Virginia and the United States.

Yet within a few years, Brown was a heroic figure to many Northerners. Union soldiers sang “John Brown’s Body” (to which tune we now sing “Battle Hymn of the Republic”), as they marched to their deaths. A few decades later, John Brown’s image appeared in murals as a glorious cross between proto-Marxist revolutionary and Old Testament patriarch. Even today, this complex and disturbing figure is widely seen as a hero, not a tragic figure.

Part of why John Brown’s reputation has been rehabilitated is that he turned out to be on the winning side of history. The brutality of slavery is now so widely recognized that many Americans today either overlook Brown’s brutal and immoral actions, or consider it somehow acceptable, because Brown was so willing to lay down his life for his cause. In association with a recent PBS documentary about John Brown, Professor of Law (and historian) Paul Finkelman wrote:

So, wherever Brown goes he is facing the possibility that he might be attacked, that he might be killed. We remember the Pottawatomie killings where Brown is responsible for the death of five pro-slavery settlers, but before Pottawatomie, at least six free-state settlers had been gunned down by Missourians, and the law had done nothing about that. No people who shot free-settlers were ever arrested, were ever tried. So, the law is all stacked against the free-state settlers.¹

While Americans abhor fanaticism, they also strangely respect the man who believes in his cause enough to die for it—and they seem to have forgotten that the people that John Brown murdered were, often as not, completely innocent parties, and morally superior to him. The first person that Brown’s men killed in the Harpers Ferry raid was a free black. When Brown’s little band of thugs went on a rampage against proslavery men at Pottawatomie, Kansas, their first victims were James P. Doyle and his two adult

sons—who, according to at least one recent study, had moved to Kansas to get away from slavery. Brown’s men split their heads open with swords, and chopped off Drury Doyle’s arms.²

Immediately following McVeigh’s arrest, there was a storm of pundits that tried to blame what happened on “hate radio,” as they characterized the rapid rise of conservative talk shows around the United States in the mid-1990s. These talk shows no more caused McVeigh’s actions than abolitionist literature caused John Brown’s murderous crimes, or antiwar protests caused the Weather Underground to blow up buildings in the late 1960s. The source of these tragic figures is a bit more fundamental to our society.

It is very tempting, and very easy, to simply write off people like John Brown and Timothy McVeigh as sociopaths. But their actions, while morally abhorrent, are not equivalent to a Ted Bundy or a Patrick Purdy. In any conventional sense, McVeigh and Brown were not mentally ill (unlike Theodore Kaczynski), nor were their acts of brutality driven by any obvious desire to inflict suffering for its own sake.

Gore Vidal—hardly a right-winger—makes the point that the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building was an act of revenge for what McVeigh perceived as a series of progressively more severe acts of criminal brutality by the federal government: “She (Reno) did a terrible thing and in response to this, out of a sense of justice, he did the same thing. Do I approve of that? No.”³

¹ “Paul Finkelman, historian on the political situation in Kansas,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/brown/filmmore/reference/interview/finkelman03.html>.

² Edward J. Renehan, Jr., *The Secret Six: How a Circle of Northern Aristocrats Helped Light the Fuse of the Civil War* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995), 95.

³ “The Author and the Terrorist,” Reuters, May 8, 2001, <http://www.cbsnews.com/now/story/0,1597,290024-412,00.shtml>.

Unfortunately, Timothy McVeigh, like John Brown, made a great immoral leap, from blaming *individuals* for crimes that they committed, to blaming *groups*. John Brown murdered James P. Doyle and his sons at Pottawatomie perhaps because they were proslavery, or perhaps because they were Southerners, and therefore sounded like those men who murdered abolitionist settlers in Kansas. McVeigh blamed the entire federal government for the actions committed by BATF and the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, and therefore was able to justify a crime that is shocking not just in the body count, but the suffering that the victims experienced, as the collapsing floors operated like a gigantic, grotesque grape press, forcing the rescuers to wade through streams of bodily fluids.⁴

If McVeigh, Brown, and the many less successful leftist bombers of the 1960s are not sociopaths, then what are they? Many of the 1960s radicals who took the path of blowing up buildings were not stupid, and did not start out evil. The America that they had been taught about in high school civics was an ideal. The real government was more than a few steps down from that ideal. It lied, it suppressed political dissent, it wasted huge numbers of lives, both American and Vietnamese, fighting a war that it did not intend to win. It is sobering to think what those 1960s radicals—many of well-educated, intelligent, and from surprisingly middle- or upper-class homes—might have done for the good of our whole society, if they had not embarked on the path of blowing up buildings—and occasionally themselves?

McVeigh also demonstrated a quite remarkable set of abilities, and one that our society was the worse for when he chose to engage in a campaign of indiscriminate

⁴ Testimony of Mike Shannon, "OKC Bombing Trial Transcript - 05/21/1997 16:31 CDT/CST.

murder. The tragedy of the Oklahoma City bombing was not just the deaths of 168 people,⁵ and the injuries of hundreds more, but that a young man who might have contributed to our society—a young man of great patriotism—had become so alienated, that he could see no point in any action but a crime of historic enormity.

The news media in the United States utterly failed at Waco. They gave the government a free ride on an event that, under the most charitable of assumptions, was a horrifying failure of the BATF and the FBI to do their jobs properly. The initial BATF raid was irrational. The FBI's decision to use *tanks* against civilians who they believed to be suffering from eschatological fantasies is hardly the action of a responsible and sensible organization. The later loss of so much evidence (six foot doors, *all* the initial raid videotapes, immediate bulldozing of the buildings) suggested something a bit worse than incompetence was involved.⁶

It would not be the first time that our government has decided that a cover-up is the correct response to incompetence and criminal behavior by its agents. We should not be surprised; corporations do it; labor unions do it; individuals do it. Our system of government is based not on angels running our institutions, but on interest balancing interest. Every self-interested group has a counterbalancing watchdog.

Unfortunately, the Fourth Estate, the government's strongest watchdog, failed to do its job at Waco. With a very few exceptions, the news media simply refused to examine what brought about the horrendous death of 80 people, many of them children.

⁵ Or 169, depending on what you do with the spare leg. See Testimony of Thomas Marshall, "OKC Bombing Trial Transcript - 05/22/1997 21:09 CDT/CST."

⁶ See David B. Kopel and Paul H. Blackman, *No More Wacos: What's Wrong With Federal Law Enforcement and How to Fix It* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1997).

The legislative branch did no better. The first Congressional hearings were a joke, and the second set, after Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994, were only slightly improved. For Democrats like then-Representative Charles Schumer, the hearings were all about protecting the Clinton Administration and his pets at BATF. The notion that the government had done something at least grossly incompetent, and at worst, criminal, seems never to have occurred to him.

A society that ignores evil because it is inconvenient, or because it upsets “little people” like John Brown, or Timothy McVeigh, or a nameless black kid growing up in a ghetto, will pay a price for that pigheadedness. It may be the price of urban neighborhoods where middle class people dare not visit after dark. It may be a continual drumbeat of distrust of the government even when it is telling the truth (as it probably is about the destruction of TWA 800). Every once in a great while, the price of the governmental and media elites ignoring evil may be a bit bigger, and a source of greater sorrow.

What the American government lost on April 19, 1993 was not just a church and 80 Branch Davidians. It also lost the trust and love of *many* Americans like Timothy McVeigh. The vast majority of these now distrustful Americans will never blow up a federal building; their moral codes would not allow such a wanton act of evil. The vast majority will never put on camouflage, and drill in the woods with a militia. But neither will they ever again trust the government or mainstream journalists.

The elite that runs this country needs to understand this lesson from the short and unhappy life of Timothy McVeigh, and from the suffering and premature deaths of the

victims at Waco. Ignoring evil because it creates no political liabilities is not just immoral. Sometimes it destroys buildings, lives, and families.

Clayton E. Cramer's most recent book was *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Praeger Press, 1999). His web page is <http://claytoncramer.com>.