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Trumpism echoes Timothy McVeigh's right-wing extremism, 30 years after the Oklahoma bombing

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This week, it will be 30 years since the Oklahoma bombing.

On the morning of April 19 1995, anti-government right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh parked a Ryder truck loaded with 5,000 pounds of agricultural fertiliser and diesel fuel at the front of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. At 9am, McVeigh lit two separate fuses – in case one failed. Two minutes later, the bomb exploded, killing 168 people (including 19 children) and injuring close to 700.

Today, the bombing remains the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in United States history. But in the cultural memory, Oklahoma was eclipsed by 9/11, when America – and the world – shifted their attention to the threat posed by radical Islamic extremism.

Three decades on, the bombing is back on the cultural agenda, as the right-wing extremism that drove McVeigh is on the rise.

In 2025, the threat from US-based violent extremists is believed to be “high”, according to the [Department of Homeland Security](#). Domestic terrorist attacks and plots against government targets motivated by partisan political beliefs [nearly tripled](#) in the five years before last – compared to the previous 25 years combined.

New and recent chronicles of the Oklahoma bombing are not just a reflection on the past, but a warning about the future.

Timothy McVeigh leaves the courthouse in Oklahoma, April 21, 1995. David Longstreath/AAP

A right-wing ‘outlaw’

In his award-winning book about the bombing, [Homegrown](#) (2023), US lawyer and journalist Jeffrey Toobin writes:

In the thirty years since the Oklahoma City bombing, the country took an extraordinary journey – from nearly universal horror at the action of a right-wing extremist [McVeigh] to wide embrace of a president who reflected the bomber’s values.

Toobin draws ominous parallels between his subject’s political motivations, and the values and views of the January 6 insurrectionists.

McVeigh, a Gulf War veteran and gun-rights absolutist, always claimed he bombed the Murrah building to protest the “abuses and usurpations” of Bill Clinton’s government.

He specifically mentioned two infamous armed confrontations between extremists and the federal government. One was the 1992 standoff between FBI agents and white separatists at [Ruby Ridge](#), which resulted in three deaths, including the killing of a 14-year-old boy. A year later, more than 75 people died in [Waco, Texas](#), after a shootout and 51-day siege between the FBI and an apocalyptic religious sect, the Branch Davidians.

McVeigh was also mobilised by Clinton’s 1994 [ban of assault weapons](#), which he and other conservatives believed was a violation of the Second Amendment. The assault ban was the final straw.

“When the guns are outlawed”, McVeigh wrote in a letter, “I become an outlaw.”

One of his strongest influences – and a constant companion – was [The Turner Diaries](#), a 1978 novel sometimes referred to as “the bible of the racist right”. In it, a white nationalist destroys a FBI building in Washington with a truck bomb, and the US becomes engaged in a nuclear civil war. McVeigh read the book during his army training and sold copies at gun shows.

His embrace of violence as a justified response to political grievances is reflected in the rhetoric of Trump’s presidency, argues Toobin – most famously, Trump’s [January 6 speech](#), when he exhorted his supporters to march on Congress and “fight like Hell”.

All the trends that McVeigh embodied – the political extremism, the obsession with gun rights, the search for like-minded allies, and above all, the embrace of violence – came together under the 45th president.

 protesters scaling walls of Capitol building

The values and views that McVeigh embodied, like political extremism and gun absolutism, came together under Trump. zz STRF STAR MAX IPx/AAP

When choosing a date for the bombing, McVeigh deliberately opted for April 19: the second anniversary of Waco and the date of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, which marked the start of the American War of Independence. Like McVeigh, the rioters who stormed the Capitol saw “the rebellion” as akin to the revolutionary struggle of the Founding Fathers. They, too, believed violence was necessary to achieve their goals.

In this way, Toobin argues, McVeigh represents an early prototype of the aggrieved Trump voter. The actions of McVeigh and some Trump supporters belong to “a long tradition of gun-obsessed, antidemocratic, violence-fueled extremism”.

The only difference is, Trump’s extremist ideas have become mainstream.

McVeigh and the MAGA movement

A new docudrama, McVeigh, released last month in American cinemas, is a responsible account of McVeigh’s alienation and hostility, and a brooding rumination on the complex interaction of factors that led to his radicalisation.

With great restraint, director Mike Ott avoids the sensationalism one might expect.

In McVeigh, the bombing itself is never depicted. Instead, the narrative follows the weeks leading up to the attack, slowly tracking McVeigh’s assemblage of the bomb with his accomplice, Terry Nichols, an old army friend.

Silence, in this sense, is the film's modus operandi.

In an early scene, McVeigh (played by Alfie Allen) points a pistol at the television, miming the execution of former US Attorney General Janet Reno as she testifies at [the Waco hearing](#).

In the film's closing moments, we see McVeigh in his truck on the morning of the bombing, waiting patiently for the red light to change.

McVeigh and Nichols speak in gruff monosyllables, their coded communications allowing the pair to hide "in plain sight". This makes their plans difficult to decipher, though we know how the story ends.

Convicted Oklahoma City bombing conspirator Terry Nichols. Donna McWilliam/AAP

The film has been criticised as a missed opportunity to critically examine the machinery that radicalised McVeigh. But the understated – and at times, excruciatingly dull – representation of events is the very point. Conspiratorial thinking is invisible, and the descent into violent extremism is marked by moments of mundane horror and aimlessness.

We can't pinpoint the exact moment when McVeigh decides to commit to the attack, nor do we know how it could have been prevented.

But propelled by [what one former mentor called](#) his "right-wing, survivalist, paramilitary-type philosophy", McVeigh can easily be read as a man who is trying to "make America great again".

In this respect, the slow burn creates an ominous atmosphere as the film drifts toward its inevitable conclusion. The film subtly conveys McVeigh's rage at the government and, in particular, his pursuit of retribution for Ruby Ridge, Waco and the assault ban, as accelerating forces.

The myth of the 'lone wolf'

Like Homegrown, McVeigh debunks the myth McVeigh was a lone wolf.

Instead of presenting McVeigh as an eccentric oddity or a freakish outsider, the film shows how he found community in both Elohim, a small religious community with white supremacist orientations, and on the gun show circuit, where he sold books, bumper stickers, guns and ammunition.

Indeed, McVeigh shared his plans for the bombing with others. Like Terry Nichols and his brother James, McVeigh was connected to the Michigan Militia, an armed paramilitary group that advocates for armed defence against federal overreach and perceived incursions on freedom.

“McVeigh may have thought of himself as a lone wolf”, writes [Jason Burke](#), “but he was not one.”

Army friend Michael Fortier knew about McVeigh's plot. Sue Ogrocki/AAP

In Homegrown, Toobin too exposes the role of Nichols, who remains in the federal supermax prison in Colorado, serving life without parole. He also exposes [Michael Fortier](#) (another army friend of McVeigh's) and his wife Lori, who both knew about the plot but failed to warn authorities.

Importantly, given the rise of extremist parties and movements, both Homegrown and McVeigh make clear there is no single cause of radicalisation and no single pathway to becoming a violent extremist.

Interestingly, Toobin even suggests McVeigh became an incel before the term itself existed. He argues that in the absence of social media, McVeigh used letter writing to share his extremist views and recruit prospective allies.

Like the incels of a later day, McVeigh was unable to attract the sexual interest of women and responded with rage toward them [...] his resentments against Blacks (for taking his job opportunities) and women (for denying him companionship) festered and grew.

Timothy McVeigh as a child, in a home movie presented by defence at his trial. AAP

McVeigh came of age before the modern internet, but as a teen he was intrigued by its early iteration in the mid-1980s. An amateur hacker, he even broke into a defense department computer using the code name “Wanderer”. Still, he was unable to access social media and other digital technologies, which explains, in part, why he was dismissed as a lone wolf unable to find his “pack”.

“I believe there is an army out there, ready to rise up, even though I never found it”, McVeigh told his lawyers.

Toobin believes if social media existed in the early 1990s, McVeigh would have been able to galvanise the army he yearned for. “More than any other reason”, Toobin concludes, “the internet accounts for the difference between McVeigh's lonely crusade and the thousands who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021.”

McVeigh's legacy

McVeigh was executed by lethal injection on June 11, 2001, exactly three months before 9/11.

He never showed remorse for his actions. He believed the bombing was a justified response to the “arrogance and oppressive power” of the Clinton government, and described the children he killed as “collateral damage”.

Before he was executed, McVeigh requested his ashes be scattered over the Oklahoma City National Memorial, on the site where the Murrah building once stood.

His defence lawyer and longtime friend, Rob Nigh, talked him out of the plan: “a kind of sneering double immortality for the bombing itself and for his return to the site for eternity”. Instead, McVeigh's remains were released to the winds in the Rocky Mountains.

The decision, as Toobin notes, was a symbolic one:

By concluding his journey in this way, McVeigh would be everywhere. Where, in a way, he remains.