

Dirty for Dirty

by Samuel Francis

“Nothing is easier than to blame the dead.”

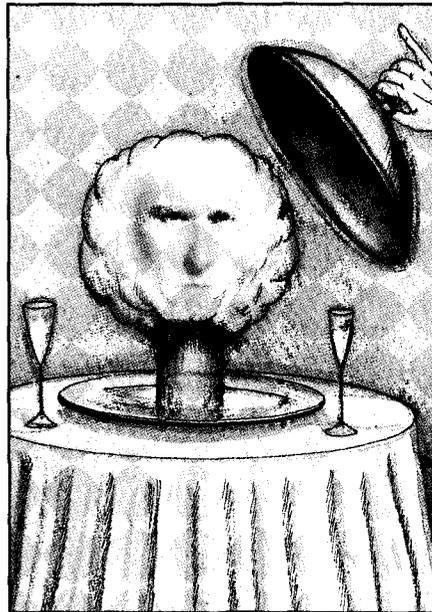
—Julius Caesar

American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing
by Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck
New York: ReganBooks;
426 pp., \$26.00

In the 1944 movie *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, Spencer Tracy, playing Col. Jimmy Doolittle, briefs his flyers before they take off to bomb their Japanese targets by telling them that they are almost certain to be killing civilians and that, if any of them have any moral problems with that, they can back out now. No one does, and the problem is never raised again.

It is not known if the late, unlamented Timothy J. McVeigh ever saw Dalton Trumbo's chest-thumping war movie that blatantly propagandizes on behalf of blowing the filthy little Japs to smithereens. His taste ran to rather more modern films, such as *Star Trek* and—his favorite—Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, but it is doubtful that he had any more problem with killing civilians than the American heroes of World War II did. According to *American Terrorist*, an exhaustive and not unsympathetic account of the life and thought of Timothy McVeigh by two *Buffalo News* reporters in whom he confided, McVeigh did have problems with the Gulf War, in which he served with distinction, and with his own killing of two Iraqi soldiers in the course of combat. McVeigh had doubts about the propriety of the Gulf War from the

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Earl Keley

McVeigh, of course, had every right to say what he wanted to say, and even if every bit of it were chicken droppings, it would still provide a valuable insight into his mind and motivations. And although much of what McVeigh *did* have to say is banal in the extreme, his core message was one that Americans ought to listen to and think about.

beginning, but he was also a professional soldier (a “warrior,” in his view) who prided himself on being able to perform his mission without hesitation or complaint. It was precisely the same professional military mentality that he brought to the planning and perpetration of the largest act of terrorism and mass murder in American history, the Oklahoma City bombing of April 19, 1995, for which he was executed last June.

Michel and Herbeck's *American Terrorist* has been savaged for its supposed whitewashing of Timothy McVeigh and for providing the murderer a platform from which he was allowed to publicize his political beliefs and justify his actions. Attorney General John Ashcroft publicly begged the news media not to become “Timothy McVeigh's co-conspirator in his assault on America's public safety and upon America itself,” as though what McVeigh had to say was itself an act of terrorism.

By now, it is generally known that Michel and Herbeck's book that he planned, built, and planted the bomb that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Building and killed 168 people and that he claimed he acted largely alone, with only minimal assistance from his friends, Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier. Some, especially those on the American right, will fault the book for not exploring more intensely the various conspiracy theories that have sprouted around McVeigh and the bombing. Nowhere does the book refer to the analysis of the bomb by retired Brig. Gen. Benton K. Partin of the U.S. Air Force, an explosives-technology expert, that challenges the official view that a single bomb outside the building could have inflicted the kind of damage that occurred. Nor does it explore the conspiracy theory, woven by the *New American* and the *Spotlight*, that seeks to implicate a wide range of neo-Nazis, Satanists, U.S. and European intelligence agencies, and the Clinton administration (among other demons) in planning and masterminding the bombing as a kind of Reichstag fire with which the right-wing political opponents of the New World Order could be smeared and discredited or suppressed.

The Oklahoma City bombing did serve that purpose, as the hysterical left-

wing attack on every figure on the political right—from Newt Gingrich to the members of National Alliance—in the weeks after the bombing made clear, but Michel and Herbeck provide no evidence (nor does any other reliable source that I know of) that the perpetrators of the bombing intended it to do so. Michel and Herbeck mention only briefly McVeigh's insignificant contacts with Andreas Strassmeir and an alleged "neo-Nazi" compound at Elohim City, Oklahoma, as well as other efforts by him to contact the National Alliance, and they seem to accept at face value McVeigh's denial of any close connection between him and such groups or between such groups and the bombing.

If the book has one persistent flaw, it is that the authors seem to accept as true whatever McVeigh told them. Generally speaking, this is not a problem, since the purpose of the book is largely to tell the story of the bombing and the bomber from McVeigh's point of view. McVeigh not only wanted to get this out but to discredit the conspiratorial account offered by his former defense lawyer, Stephen Jones, in his own book about the bombing. McVeigh may have tried to make himself look considerably better, more intelligent, more psychologically and socially normal, and more attractive in character and personality than he really was, and his emphatic denial that "John Doe II" ever existed, and his effort to explain his often contradictory behavior by claiming that he really wanted to be caught so he could defend the bombing to the public, are both open to question. Yet neither McVeigh's character and purposes nor any of the bizarre conspiracy theories about the case is the most interesting or important aspect of it.

Of far greater interest, and what a good many journalists profess to be unable to understand, is why Timothy McVeigh never expressed any regret, remorse, or guilt about what he did and how his apparent indifference to his act of terror could coexist with what apparently was otherwise a more or less well-adjusted personality. Despite experiencing his parents' wrenching divorce as a child, McVeigh grew up as not only an apparently normal but even likable young man, traits he retained throughout his life. Despite the claim (made by the media from the beginning of the case) that he and "John Doe II" were "white supremacists," there is no evidence what-

soever that McVeigh was even seriously prejudiced. It is true that he was a fan of *The Turner Diaries*, a violent racist novel by National Alliance neo-Nazi William Pierce, and used to give it away to pals in the Army and later at gun shows. But what seems to have attracted him to the book is the guerrilla war against the federal government that the story gloatingly describes, and only when another soldier warned him that the book was "racist" and that he could get in trouble in the Army for handing it out did its racial views dawn on McVeigh. Michel's and Herbeck's volume includes a letter to the authors from Ted Kaczynski, the "Unabomber," who knew McVeigh briefly when they served in the same prison. Kaczynski, who comes across as a liberal stuffed shirt, acknowledges that

I saw no indication of [racist tendencies]. On the contrary, [McVeigh] was on very friendly terms with the African-American inmates here and I never heard him make any remark that could have been considered even remotely racist.

Both before and during his service in the Army, McVeigh expressed generally commonplace racial beliefs about blacks, but there is no evidence at all that he subscribed to any kind of racist ideology. He seems to have had an affair with Terry Nichols' Filipino wife, and his obsessive support for the victims of Waco, many of whom were black, would be peculiar in a serious racist.

What McVeigh was serious about was his hatred of the federal government, and it is entirely fair to call him a libertarian. Indeed, he voted for the Libertarian Party presidential candidate in 1996 before his conviction, and despite his affection for the anti-black, anti-Jewish, and pro-Nazi *Turner Diaries*, his usual rhetorical framework for condemning what he disliked was "Nazi," "fascist," "Gestapo-like," "stormtroopers," etc. Yet his views were not entirely consistent. He loved the movie *Contact*, based on the late Carl Sagan's sappy science-fiction novel, as well as *Star Trek*, never grasping that the universalist ethic and collectivism that both reflect underlies the sort of political system that libertarians despise and resist. His religious beliefs were of little consequence; brought up a Roman Catholic, he told friends that "science is my religion," although he appears not to have

known much about science beyond the art of making bombs. His reading—until he found himself in prison—consisted almost entirely of science fiction and entirely forgettable political tracts denouncing the federal government. Then he moved up to *Atlas Shrugged* and *Doctor Zhivago*. His school performance was never impressive; in prison, he graded 126 on an IQ test, not a brilliant score (Kaczynski's IQ is 167) but nothing to be ashamed of, either. His literary tastes may be judged from William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*, which he had distributed to witnesses at his execution.

Timothy McVeigh, then, was largely an ordinary man, and if there is nothing in his life or background to strike us as remarkable, neither is there much to impress us as sinister; it is probably because the conventional psychobabble categories and other clichés do not apply to or explain him that most journalists who have pondered McVeigh have no clue why he did what he did, much less why he seemed to feel no guilt about it. McVeigh was the product of a white, fairly affluent, working-class social environment; while his parents divorced, so do lots of other people whose children do not grow up to commit terrorist atrocities. Moreover, the ideology McVeigh professed is one that most American journalists find incomprehensible. Government is our friend, isn't it? The United States is a democracy, after all. Why would anyone hate the government? Anyone who does hate a democratic government is obviously a socially maladjusted psychopath. Why would any normal person worry very much about a bunch of religious nuts at Waco or a white racist like Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge? Anyone concerned with that sort of thing must be nuts himself.

McVeigh outraged many people by describing the daycare center in the Murrah Building and the children whom he killed as "collateral damage," and by comparing the civilians slaughtered there with the fictitious characters sitting at computer consoles on board the Deathstar in *Star Wars*. The brutality and insensitivity of the remarks contrast with the McVeigh that emerges in this book, and also with the man who wrote a series of letters to journalist Phil Bacharach, who published them in the May issue of *Esquire*. Bacharach concludes,

It is beyond me to reconcile the Timothy McVeigh who murdered

168 people with the writer of these letters. . . . I do know one thing: In the written word, at least, he has not a whisper of conscience.

McVeigh claimed to Michel and Herbeck that he did not know the Murrah Building had a daycare center, that it was not visible from the street, that he would have picked another target had he known it was there, and that he tried to avoid harming civilians. That may or may not be true, but it really does not matter very much. Would the bombing have been morally defensible if no children had been killed? Did McVeigh worry that taxpayers, veterans, crime victims, plaintiffs and defendants, and others with legitimate claims against the federal government might also be in the building that morning? The fact is that McVeigh did not give a damn about them, or the children, or whether there were federal law-enforcement agents in the building, or whether the federal bureaucrats he deliberately murdered had personally done anything wrong. Timothy McVeigh was indifferent to his victims because he had convinced himself that he was a soldier enlisted in his own private war against what he called the “federal juggernaut,” and he felt no more remorse for slaughtering the enemies he selected than Jimmy Doolittle’s fliers felt when they firebombed Japanese civilians in Tokyo, or later in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, or Dresden; or (as McVeigh himself wrote in a letter last May to Fox News correspondent Rita Cosby) American pilots when they bombed civilian targets in Iraq and Serbia.

“Bombing the Murrah Federal Building,” McVeigh wrote to Miss Cosby,

was morally and strategically equivalent to the U.S. hitting a government building in Serbia, Iraq or other nations. Based on observations of the policies of my own government, I viewed this action as an acceptable option. From this perspective, what occurred in Oklahoma City was no different than [*sic*] what Americans rain on the heads of others all the time and, subsequently, my mindset was and is one of clinical detachment.

Much the same point is made in *American Terrorist*: “The American military,” Michel and Herbeck write,

had been using the same philosophy for years, he would argue. American bombing raids were designed to take lives, not just destroy buildings. The atom bombs that brought a bloody end to World War II—the bombs in whose image he saw his own—were designed to kill not just hundreds but thousands of people. He claimed to take no pleasure from killing. But in his mind, McVeigh had no trouble justifying what he was about to do.

Indeed, McVeigh’s argument is not noticeably different from that invoked by neoconservative columnist Bruce Fein in a column during the Gulf War. When U.S. bombs struck (apparently accidentally) an Iraqi bomb shelter containing civilians, President Bush expressed regrets for the deaths that ensued. Fein, in a column published in the *Washington Times* on February 20, 1991, claimed that “the vast majority of Iraq’s population has actively assisted Saddam’s international lawlessness” and that the “people of Iraq” (not just its government or leaders) “are responsible for the aggression and war crimes of their president.”

Why, therefore, should Mr. Bush instruct the U.S. military scrupulously to avoid civilian targets in Iraq . . . ? During World War II the Allied powers massively bombed Berlin, Dresden, and Tokyo for reasons of military and civilian morale. Winston Churchill instructed the Royal Air Force to “make the rubble dance” in German cities. Why is Mr. Bush treating Iraqi civilians more solicitously than the enemy civilians of World War II?

If the U.S. military can blame the “innocent” civilians of an enemy state for the policies of that state and deliberately wage lethal action against them, then why should Timothy McVeigh not justify his own war against “innocent” federal bureaucrats and their children? Forget *The Turner Diaries*. The real question is: Did Timothy McVeigh read Bruce Fein?

McVeigh reflects exactly the same morality that Fein expresses, a morality that knows no distinction between civilian and military but lumps them together as “enemies” and regards them all as fair game to be blown to bits. To some ex-

tent, McVeigh was mocking that morality in his bombing of the Murrah Building, reducing it to the absurdity that it is; but partly, he was also embracing it (as he explicitly does in his comments to Michel and Herbeck and in his letter to Miss Cosby), and exploiting it as a justification of his action. Insofar as he embraced it, McVeigh felt and could feel no guilt for the bombing; insofar as he mocked it, he could claim that the federal government could not fairly blame him for doing what it does routinely, that he was merely paying it back in the same coin—“dirty for dirty,” as he put it to the authors.

What Timothy McVeigh did was indeed an act of mass murder that deserved death, if not a good deal more. But the point he tried to make in his act of murder remains a serious one—that, in modern warfare as practiced routinely and happily by the United States and other modern democracies, and increasingly even in domestic law enforcement, lethal civilian casualties are acceptable (if civilians are not often deliberately selected targets). McVeigh’s insistence that Americans see that point and the horror it embodies was made with a savagery he had no right to commit; but it may have been, as he claimed it was, the only way the point could be communicated at all to a government that has become too morally irresponsible even to offer Jimmy Doolittle’s token option of backing out now and a population too morally obtuse to accept the choice, even if it were offered. It is hardly surprising that so few journalists were able to understand why Timothy McVeigh felt no remorse for the mass bloodshed he caused; hardly anyone else in the United States today is able to understand it either, or the moral point that the Oklahoma City bombing tried to convey. c

LIBERAL ARTS

ROLL OVER, MARTIN LUTHER

“There are ways of birth control. I’m a Protestant, and Protestants don’t have any problem with family planning [*sic*], and the Chinese government is saying one child a family, which seems excessive, perhaps, but that’s the rule and so far it’s working for them.”

—Pat Robertson, from an April 18, 2001, interview on *The Edge with Paula Zahn*

The Reluctant Candidate

by Alan Miller

Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus

by Rick Perlstein

New York: Hill and Wang Publishers; 671 pp., \$30.00



As a conservative undergraduate student during the early 1960's, I spent many a long night engaged in animated political argument with a close friend whose supercharged IQ was exceeded only by his condescending manner. The fellow never tired of reminding me that, yes, there were a few responsible Republican public officials. He would always tick off a very short list of them, which routinely included such liberal GOP icons as Sen. Clifford Case of New Jersey, and, of course, Nelson Rockefeller. My friend summarily dismissed conservatives as denizens of the netherworld, characterizing them as either Southern bigots who believed that blacks, women, Roman Catholics, and Jews should be kept in their place, or as benighted boors who occupied the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder.

Then, in 1964, a cantankerous Arizona senator confounded pundits and Republican leaders alike by capturing the GOP presidential nomination. Barry Goldwater's sudden ascendance, and the national conservative movement that he helped set in motion, are the subject of Rick Perlstein's provocative yet sympathetic book.

Rather than resorting to boilerplate explanations for Lyndon Johnson's landslide victory, Perlstein concentrates on the shifting political landscape. He keelhauls the pundits for smugly dismissing Goldwater's candidacy, citing their premature postmortem as "one of the most dramatic failures of discernment in the history of American journalism." Two years later, he notes, "conservatives so dominated Congress that [LBJ] couldn't even get a majority to appropriate money for rodent control in the slums." The House Republican Caucus elected as chair of its policy committee John Rhodes,

a Goldwater protégé from Arizona. Moreover, ten new conservative Republican governors—most notably Ronald Reagan in California—won election. (Not bad for a conservative movement that had been written off as a mere political footnote by the so-called wise men after the 1964 election.) Perlstein reminds us of a growing national discontent with President John Kennedy in 1963 that caused more and more voters to reconsider whether he deserved reelection: Increasing civil unrest combined with a rudderless foreign policy had prompted many to question Kennedy's competence. More and more people began to clamor for a plainspoken leader who would change the political dialogue.

November 22, 1963, of course, altered the political landscape, and the hazy afterglow of Camelot lulled much of the country into nostalgic reveries about the fallen prince and what might have been had he lived to fulfill his destiny. Few recalled that Kennedy's fateful Dallas trip was basically intended to help close the ever-widening political breach in the Deep South. President Johnson acknowledged the magnitude of that breach when, after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he told his staff, "I think we just gave the South to the Republicans for your lifetime and mine."

Perlstein also documents the merciless media mugging that Goldwater received from the moment he became the GOP presidential nominee and decamped from the Cow Palace in San Francisco. Magazines and newspapers that had formerly praised his forthrightness began to pummel him as a reckless political extremist. The normally GOP-friendly *Saturday Evening Post* reflected this sulfurous sentiment when it recommended his crushing defeat for the salvation of the party. Psychiatrists and psychologists were trotted out to question Goldwater's sanity. The Democrats, under direction from Bill Moyers, proved adept at character assassination, depicting Goldwater as a trigger-happy wild man who was itching for full-scale nuclear war in Vietnam.

Meantime, Goldwater's many missteps played into the hands of his critics. Downright disdainful of the hoopla involved in running a national campaign, the reluctant candidate was far more comfortable articulating his philosophical differences with an overweening federal government. As a presidential candidate, Goldwater was too honest, stubbornly refusing to pander to his audi-

ences. Instead, he inveighed against Social Security when addressing Florida retirees, assailed the Tennessee Valley Authority before the very folks who benefited from the federal project, condemned federal cotton subsidies in the presence of Southern cotton growers, and criticized a major defense contract to General Dynamics in Fort Worth, Texas, the home of the military-aircraft division of the company. Goldwater's dislike of campaigning showed in his desultory, rambling speeches, as in his response to supporters who kept chanting, "We want Barry": "If you'll shut up, you'll get him."

Perlstein claims that Goldwater's biggest strategic blunder was jettisoning F. Clifton White, who was primarily responsible for the senator's success in gaining the nomination. White's command and control of supporters at the convention was masterful. Yet he was discarded soon thereafter in favor of such Goldwater confidantes as Denison Kitchel and Karl Hess, who were clearly beyond their depth.

Despite his several shortcomings, the candidate remained a straight-shooter. When Lee Edwards implored the senator to capitalize on his rugged Western persona, Goldwater shot back, "Lee, we're not going to have that kind of crap on this campaign. This is going to be a campaign of principles, not of personalities. I don't want that kind of Madison Avenue stuff, and if you try it, I will kick your ass out of this office."

His opponent was not so scrupulous, allowing his operatives to suggest that Goldwater would savage Social Security, start World War III, roll back civil-rights laws, and otherwise unleash the forces of darkness upon the land. These horror stories were commonly accepted on college campuses, where this thoroughly decent man was routinely heckled as a hatemonger. Late in the campaign, I attended a Goldwater speech at Toledo University. No sooner had the senator begun to speak than he was showered with verbal abuse from the crowd. He had to cut short his remarks. Ronald Reagan, who campaigned for Goldwater, had far better crowd reactions. His ability to mesmerize an audience prompted ABC newsmen Howard K. Smith to comment that Reagan had missed his calling: He should have gone into politics. (The fabled speech that Reagan delivered toward the campaign's end prompted comparisons with William Jennings Bryan's fiery "Cross of Gold" oration before the