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# ***Perspective***

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## **Libertarians, Consevatives, and the Oklahoma City Bombing**

The April 19th terrorist bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City dramatically changed the debate over limiting the size and power of the federal government. The persons thought to be responsible for the bombing are characterized by the media as "right-wing extremists" who view the federal government as "the enemy." Conservatives and libertarians from Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh down to grassroots activists and public policy think tanks have been accused of encouraging violent action against government agents.

Enough time has passed since the bombing that libertarians and conservatives can respond to critics without appearing to be exploiting a tragic event. It is essential, in fact, that we do so in order to participate in the public debate over how public policies ought to be changed to prevent or diminish the likelihood of future anti-government terrorist actions.

It must be said up front that the Oklahoma City bombing was a horrible and unjustifiable act of violence. The victims and their families deserve our sympathy. The persons responsible for committing the crime should be swiftly brought to justice and severely punished.

The Oklahoma City bombing does not reflect the views or the tactics of the great majority of libertarians and conservatives. We do not condone the use of violence to achieve social or political goals. Nor do we subscribe to the conspiracy theories, racism, and religious bigotry that are alleged to be part of the ideology driving anti-government terrorism. Such beliefs have nothing at all in common with our commitment to individual liberty, free enterprise, and limited government. Indeed, paranoia, racism, and bigotry reflect a commitment to very different interests: naive collectivism, anti-business and anti-technology biases, and a willingness to use force to impose one person's beliefs on another. *Those are more commonly the views of leftists and socialists than of libertarians and conservatives.*

Like all movements, the libertarian and conservative movement has its "fringe," people impatient with "practical" considerations and tempted to cross the line between civil disobedience and the use of violence. The civil rights movement has the Black Muslims; the environmental

movement has Earth First! and Greenpeace; even the pro-life movement has members willing to use force against doctors who perform abortions. The movement for smaller and more decentralized government has, in the militia movement, a similarly radical element.

Supporters of less government should condemn the use of violence in the name of their goal. Like their counterparts in the civil rights, environment, and pro-life movements, libertarians and conservatives should try to dissuade those who would use violence by explaining the negative consequences of violent acts and enlisting them in peaceful alternative activities. Such activities abound: political activism, referendum and initiative drives, letter writing campaigns, organizing and participating in protest marches and demonstrations, self-education, public speaking and debating, and more.

The nation's growing network of property rights organizations, conservative advocacy groups, and libertarian and conservative think tanks offers opportunities, training, and support in all those areas. It is not preposterous to suggest that, had Timothy McVeigh been actively engaged in a "mainstream" libertarian or conservative organization, the tragedy of Oklahoma City would not have occurred. Such organizations are uniquely positioned to identify, educate, and tap the energies of those who might otherwise succumb to the temptation to use violence.

Besides working to keep their more radical colleagues peaceful, libertarians and conservatives should take to the air waves and newspaper "op-ed" pages to counter the widely heard suggestion that only a tiny, "paranoid" minority of Americans fear or oppose their government. That simply isn't true, and it deflects attention away from the true source of, and solution to, anti-government terrorism.

A Gallup poll conducted on April 23-24, 1995 asked "Do you think the federal government has become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens?" A remarkable 39 percent said "yes." When the question was asked again without the word "immediate," 52 percent of respondents said "yes." Fear of government is far more widespread than many elected officials or journalists wish to admit.

Why are so many people afraid of the federal government? Libertarians and conservatives know the answer: The federal government truly is out of control, and it is creating frightening numbers of victims. Tens of thousands of people across the country have had their property unjustly confiscated or severely regulated under environmental laws or RICO. Hundreds of thousands more have lost battles with the IRS or its state counterparts. Still others have been punished for exercising their right to bear arms, even as the evening news vividly reports the failure of local police to ensure their safety or the safety of their families.

In a nation filled with victims of government injustices, it is not surprising that some angry young men seek to become heros by striking back. There is no shortage of such would-be heros: people made unemployable by our criminally poor public schools, discriminatory taxes, or impenetrable regulatory system; veterans promised skills that would land them good-paying jobs in civilian life but who find themselves unemployed, unappreciated, and on the dole; boys raised in single-parent homes weaned on television and video-game violence, itching to prove, Clint Eastwood style, that they are men.

The latest media accounts tell us that the people responsible for the bombing in Oklahoma City sought retribution for the victims of the government's assault on the Branch Davidian compound two years ago in Waco, Texas. If this is true, it fits the victims-in-need-of-heros model presented here. But it would be a mistake to focus too much attention on the events in Waco.

Thousands of lesser affronts to justice occur every year that could, perhaps as easily, act as the excuse for an Oklahoma City-style bombing. A full accounting of the Waco incident would barely scratch the surface of the mountain of changes that must be made to regain people's trust.

It is vital that the lesson drawn from Oklahoma City be this: *We must reduce the size and power of the federal government.* Only a return to the spirit and the letter of the Tenth Amendment — a devolution of power and responsibility to state and local governments and to “the people” — will restore peace between the American people and their government.

The alternative interpretation — that Oklahoma City “proves” we should give even greater power to the federal government to protect us from a few “crazies” — utterly fails to address the cause of the crisis. Consequently, it would not prevent some number of angry Americans from crossing the line between civil disobedience and violence. Instead of producing peace, it would institutionalize a state of permanent war between the American people and their government. The outcome could well be the end of liberty in America.



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