

The case of Eric Rudolph: Right-wing terrorism and the Bush administration

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Suspected right-wing terrorist Eric Rudolph was arraigned in federal district court in Birmingham, Alabama Monday, facing murder charges in one of a series of bombings carried out from 1996 to 1998. The bomb attacks killed two people and injured more than a hundred.

Rudolph was captured in the early morning hours of May 31, after a routine stop by a local policeman in the small town of Murphy, North Carolina, in the mountainous region where he is believed to have been hiding for the past five years.

The first attack in the series of bombings, which occurred during the 1996 Summer Olympics, had the biggest impact. A bomb hidden in a knapsack left at Centennial Olympic Park exploded just after midnight, July 27, 1996, killing an Albany, Georgia woman, Alice Hawthorne, 44, and wounding 111 other people.

The FBI initially dismissed any political motivation in the attack, focusing its attention on Richard Jewell, a security guard at the site of the bombing who had sought to alert police to the knapsack before it exploded. After several months during which the FBI suggested Jewell had planted the bomb seeking attention or a better job, the agency had to exonerate him and make a public apology.

Forensic evidence reportedly links the 1996 bomb blast to the three subsequent attacks, which hit an office building north of Atlanta housing a family planning center, a gay nightclub in Atlanta and an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama.

Twelve people were injured in the two Atlanta bombings, but no one was killed, although the attacker had taken measures to greatly increase the likely impact. In each instance, two bombs were set—one against the target, and a second, timed to go off later, whose purpose was to kill rescue workers and onlookers. At the family planning center, the first bomb caused only minor damage, but the second bomb injured seven. At the gay nightclub, five were wounded in the initial blast, but the second bomb failed to go off. It was found later by police and destroyed.

The January 29, 1998 blast at New Woman All Women Health Care Center killed an off-duty Birmingham police officer, Robert Sanderson, who was working as a security guard at the clinic, and severely wounded a clinic nurse, Emily Lyons. The murder was particularly cold-blooded, since the attacker placed the bomb near the clinic entrance and used a remote-control device to set it off, while he watched from a distance to insure that the victims were within range.

Sanderson kept Lyons back from the entrance while he

approached it alone. The blast, which killed him instantly, was so powerful that it blew out windows hundreds of yards away. Lyons lost her left eye and the iris of her right eye, and suffered hundreds of puncture wounds, broken bones and other lacerations. The bomb had been packed with nails to increase its destructive force.

The Birmingham bombing led to Rudolph's identification as the principal suspect. One eyewitness saw Rudolph walking away from the explosion, while another wrote down the North Carolina license tags on his new pickup truck. A warrant was issued for his arrest, and the search began in the mountainous southwestern tip of North Carolina where he grew up.

The last report on Rudolph's whereabouts came in July 1998, when he took six months worth of food and other supplies from a store in Murphy. He apparently did not move far from his home base, as he was arrested only a few hundred yards from where he was last seen. According to press reports after his arrest, the fugitive confirmed to police that he had been living near Murphy throughout the last five years.

Rudolph had received some military training after enlisting in the army in 1986. Eighteen months later he left the military with a less-than-honorable discharge. Like Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh, whose social profile he resembles, Rudolph was unsuccessful in gaining entry to an elite unit: McVeigh failed in his bid to become a Green Beret, Rudolph was turned down by the Rangers.

His military experience and a boyhood knowledge of the Nantahala National Forest, which surrounds Murphy, only go so far, however, in explaining how Rudolph eluded capture for more than five years. It is clear from the circumstances surrounding his arrest—he appeared clean, recently shaven, with his hair cut neatly, wearing nearly new sneakers—that he did not spend five years hiding in the woods without any contact with the local community.

According to a report in the *Boston Globe*, investigators have found a campsite used by Rudolph that was only 500 yards from where he was captured Saturday. Another press account, in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, quoted local residents who said they had seen a “bum-looking guy hanging around downtown” for several days before Rudolph's arrest.

Bumper stickers and other paraphernalia backing Rudolph have appeared in the area, and one local restaurant owner announced she was starting a defense fund and posted a sign urging passersby to “Pray for Eric Rudolph.”

It is difficult from a distance to gauge how widespread such

sentiments are. They appear to be a combination of instinctive sympathy for a local man on the run, resentment of the hundreds of federal agents who initially flooded the area in 1998-99 searching for the fugitive, and some backing for his extreme right-wing views.

More important is the likelihood that Rudolph was sustained by a relative handful of ultra-right activists who espouse the same anti-Semitic, white supremacist and Christian fundamentalist ideology. Such elements have made it possible for other right-wing terrorists, such as the assassins of abortion doctors, to remain on the loose for years at a time.

Press accounts, citing federal investigators and the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights group that has long monitored neo-fascist and racist activity in the region, say that Rudolph was an adherent of Christian Identity, the white supremacist religion underlying such groups as the Aryan Nation.

After her husband's death in 1981, Rudolph's mother took her family to Schell City, Missouri, in the Ozark Mountains, where they lived for four months with the Church of Israel, a congregation with links to Christian Identity. By the ninth grade, the year he dropped out of school, Rudolph had embraced anti-Semitism, writing a class paper denying the Holocaust had happened. In later years he repeatedly expressed Nazi-style hatred of blacks, Jews, gays and immigrants.

In a 2001 interview with *Intelligence Report*, the publication of the Southern Poverty Law Center, his former sister-in-law, Deborah Rudolph, recalled, "Eric hated weak people. He would say Hitler killed all those people to get rid of the weak. He would say if you're weak, you are no good to society because you can't contribute." Eric Rudolph's own "contribution" to society was to grow marijuana—apparently the only steady occupation he ever engaged in—netting as much as \$60,000 a year.

To the extent that it has examined the political background of the Rudolph case at all, the US media has sought to focus attention on local sympathy for the fugitive terrorist in the North Carolina backwoods, portraying this as essentially harmless and almost quaint, like hog-calling contests or squirrel hunting.

The media is entirely silent on the larger issue: the role of the Republican Party in creating the political and moral atmosphere for right-wing terrorism, by whipping up hysteria over abortion, homosexuality, gun control and similar issues, and pandering to racism and anti-Semitism.

There is a grotesque irony in the spectacle of Attorney General John Ashcroft presiding over the arrest, arraignment and prosecution of Eric Rudolph. Ashcroft has himself expressed political views on abortion and gay rights that are substantially identical to those voiced by Rudolph, whatever differences they may have on tactics.

Many leading Republicans have made common cause with racist and white supremacist elements, particularly in the South, where such elements shifted their allegiance from the Democratic Party after the civil rights reforms of the 1960s. Ashcroft, for instance, was on friendly terms with *Southern Patriot* magazine, a publication that preaches the glories of the old Confederacy and the legitimacy of a war to defend slavery.

Ashcroft and George Bush both gave speeches at the racist Bob

Jones University in South Carolina, solidarizing themselves with an institution that regards blacks, Jews and Catholics as inferior. Ashcroft's 1999 speech included the declaration that the basis of American government was "We have no king but Jesus"; i.e., a flat rejection of the separation of church and state in favor of the theocratic outlook that Christian fundamentalist doctrine should be established as the law of the land.

Ashcroft, former Georgia Congressman Bob Barr and former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi had close ties with the Council of Conservative Citizens, a successor to the White Citizens Councils that organized resistance to desegregation during the civil rights era. The councils were the "respectable" wing of the racist establishment, subcontracting out the use of violent and terrorist methods to the Ku Klux Klan. In a somewhat analogous fashion, the Republican Party of today denounces abortion as a "holocaust," while leaving it to the Eric Rudolphs and James Kopps to carry out the logical implications of such a position, by bombing clinics and murdering doctors.

Lott was compelled to step down as the Republican leader in the Senate last December, after his notorious comments expressing regret that Strom Thurmond was defeated in his 1948 presidential campaign on the segregationist Dixiecrat ticket. His ouster did not signify any rupture in the "wink and a nod" relationship between the Republican establishment and the white supremacist right. Lott's mistake was only to be too explicit in his comments, while failing, in the eyes of the far right, to be sufficiently aggressive as Republican leader in the Senate.

There is an enormous contrast between the indulgent treatment given by the media to those expressing open support for Eric Rudolph, and the witch-hunting hysteria against Arab-Americans and immigrants who had no association whatsoever with the September 11 terrorists. (One can only imagine the public uproar, followed by police raids, if a storekeeper in Brooklyn had put up a sign, "Pray for Osama bin Laden.")

Ashcroft's Justice Department has raided offices and seized the assets of Muslim charitable organizations in the United States, charging that even raising funds to provide food and medical care for suffering Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza Strip constitutes aid to "terrorism."

With much more evidence, federal agents could have raided the offices of the Christian Coalition, the Southern Baptist Convention and dozens of fundamentalist preachers—to say nothing of the offices of the Republican Party itself—on the grounds that they bear political and moral responsibility for fostering the homegrown terrorists of the Christian Right.

The Democratic Party, for its part, is complicit in covering up the enormous role played by extreme right-wing and fascistic elements in the Republican Party, and their political influence within the Bush administration. It works to conceal from the American people this dirty secret of American politics.



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