

Timothy McVeigh's Dreams Are Coming True

This column has been updated to reflect news developments.

Timothy McVeigh, the right-wing terrorist who killed 168 people in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, cared about one issue above all others: guns. To him, guns were synonymous with freedom, and any government attempt to regulate them meant incipient tyranny.

“When it came to guns,” writes Jeffrey Toobin in “Homegrown,” his compelling new book about the Oklahoma City attack, “McVeigh did more than simply advocate for his own right to own and use firearms; he joined an ascendant political crusade, which grew more extreme over the course of his lifetime and beyond.”

Reading Toobin’s book, it’s startling to realize how much McVeigh’s cause has advanced in the decades since his 2001 execution. McVeigh, who was a member of the K.K.K. and harbored a deep resentment of women, hoped that blowing up the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building would inspire an army of followers to make war on the government. This didn’t happen immediately, although, as the historian Kathleen Belew has written, there was a wave of militia and white supremacist violence in the bombing’s aftermath. But today, an often-inchoate movement of people who share many of McVeigh’s views is waging what increasingly looks like a low-level insurgency against the rest of us.

Not all mass shootings are ideologically motivated — far from it. But when there is an ideology involved, it’s usually a far-right one. “All the extremist-related murders in 2022 were committed by right-wing extremists of various kinds,” said a February [report](#) from the Anti-Defamation League. Sixty percent of these deaths came from two mass shootings, in Buffalo and Colorado Springs.

As you probably know by now, there was another mass shooting last weekend, at an outdoor mall in Allen, Texas. Though law enforcement has not identified a motive as of this writing, the killer reportedly wore a patch with the abbreviation for “right wing death squad,” a tribute to the Chilean fascist Augusto Pinochet that’s popular with groups like the Proud Boys. According to [The New York Times](#), investigators are looking at a social media profile they believe belonged to the gunman, which includes praise for Hitler and “hate-filled rants against women and Black people.”

There was a time when a killing like this — which left at least eight victims dead, including more than one child — would have brought the news cycle to a halt and forced politicians to respond. When the white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine parishioners in a South Carolina church in 2015, it was so shocking that the governor at the time, Nikki Haley, removed the Confederate battle flag from the State House grounds.

But mass shootings are increasingly part of the background noise of life in a country coming apart at the seams. As far as I can tell, there’s little sense that this latest shooting is a watershed moment that could spur political change. Instead, it’s the kind of regular occurrence we are expected to live with, lest the right’s quest for unfettered gun access be interrupted.

The reason that America endures a level of gun violence unique among developed countries, and that we can often do little about it, is so many politicians have views on guns that aren't far afield from McVeigh's. As Representative Jamie Raskin, a Democrat from Maryland, has [pointed out](#), it's become common to hear Republicans echo McVeigh's insurrectionary theory of the Second Amendment, which holds that Americans must be allowed to amass personal arsenals in case they need to overthrow the government. As the MAGA congresswoman Lauren Boebert once put it, the Second Amendment "has nothing to do with hunting, unless you're talking about hunting tyrants."

The Republican Party's fetishization of guns and its fetishization of insurrection — one that's reached a hysterical pitch since Donald Trump's presidency — go hand in hand. Guns are at the center of a worldview in which the ability to launch an armed rebellion must always be held in reserve. And so in the wake of mass shootings, when the public is most likely to clamor for gun regulations, Republicans regularly shore up gun access instead. In April, following a school shooting in Nashville, Republicans expelled two young Black Democratic legislators who'd led a gun control protest at the Tennessee Capitol. A few days later, the State Senate passed a [bill](#) protecting the gun industry from lawsuits.

True, the killings in Allen led a committee in the Texas House to pass a bill raising the minimum age to buy an AR-15-style rifle to 21 from 18, but, as *The Times* [reported](#), in the unlikely event it passes the full chamber "it would face almost certain rejection by the State Senate, where the hard-right lieutenant governor, Dan Patrick, holds powerful control." Today's Republican Party can scarcely tolerate anything getting between an eager buyer and a deadly weapon.

It's hard to think of a historical precedent for a society allowing itself to be terrorized in the way we have. The normalization of both right-wing terrorism and periodic mass shootings by deranged loners is possible only because McVeigh's views have been mainstreamed. "In the nearly 30 years since the Oklahoma City bombing, the country took an extraordinary journey — from nearly universal horror at the action of a right-wing extremist to wide embrace of a former president (also possibly a future president) who reflected the bomber's values," wrote Toobin.

As it happens, in the hours after the Oklahoma City bombing, before the authorities knew who McVeigh was, he was pulled over during a routine traffic stop and then arrested for carrying a gun without a permit. In 2019, however, Oklahoma legalized permitless carry. Under the new law, McVeigh would have been let go.