Harvest of Rage:
Why Oklahoma City Is Only the Beginning

By Joel Dyer, Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997, 292 pp.

On April 19, 1995, a Ryder truck filled with fertilizer and racing fuel exploded outside the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people and wounding 500 others.

Harvest of Rage is an extremely readable and informative attempt to place this brutal terrorist attack within the context of Christian fundamentalism, right-wing politics, and the dramatic decline in the living standards of America's rural population. Joel Dyer is the editor of the *Boulder Weekly* and has written many investigative features on the farm crisis and the rise of the radical right. He begins by stating two themes that govern his book: the reluctance of most Americans to recognize the existence of numerous terrorist organizations within America itself and the increasing tendency of these groups to use violence to achieve their aims.

While the smoke was still clearing from America's most infamous terrorist attack, all eyes looked across the ocean for answers. The national media began to explore which faraway terrorists were likely culprits. After all, this was Oklahoma City, the middle of the American heartland, and only the mind of some foreign murderer could have conceived such a bloodthirsty plot.

But in Oklahoma and around the nation, FBI agents were looking across our own oceans of wheat, corn, and barley for their answers. They weren't raiding the homes of Palestinian nationals or people born in Iraq or Iran. Within hours of the blast, they were questioning men and women who had attended meetings on how to stop farm foreclosures or on how to return the country to a constitutional republic (p. 1).

Harvest of Rage is divided into three parts: "Fertile Ground," "The Seeds of Influence," and "The Harvest," all three of which share with the book's title an indebtedness to organic metaphors. This reliance on organic imagery is a major feature of Dyer's book; the once-rich lands of the American heartland, he implies, are now fertile grounds only for terrorism. "Fertile Ground" examines the disastrous impact of recent government policies on America's rural population, the subsequent disenchantment with conventional government, and the subsequent allure of organizations which respond to this growing dissatisfaction and anger. "The Seeds of Influence" focuses on the nature and beliefs of these numerous, primarily right-wing Christian groups which have proliferated throughout rural America in recent years, in particular those influenced by "Christian Identity" beliefs. "The Harvest" examines the bitter disputes concerning the meaning of the American Constitution and the increasing reliance of America's disaffected rural population on common-law courts. Dyer is, of course, a journalist, and the book's audience is the educated general reader. At times, *Harvest of Rage* is a little too lushly written, but the reader is never left in doubt as to the seriousness of the author's subject: "We will continue to pay the price—one building, one pipe bomb, one burned-down church at a time—until we come to understand, first, that the nation is holding a loaded gun to its

head and, second, why so many among us are struggling to pull the trigger" (p. 7).

With a deftly ironic stroke, Dyer begins his book in Lebanon, Kansas: "a small farm town only a stone's throw away from the exact geographic center of the United States" (p. 12). For Dyer, Lebanon acts as a microcosm for numerous issues which will recur throughout his book: the divide between the rich and the poor, the place of religion in politics, hatred for the federal government, and the failed economy of America's rural heartland. After interviewing several residents of Lebanon, Dyer suggests that unemployment and poverty have actually pushed the geographic center of the United States a considerable distance to the right. A central issue in this first section is the suicide rate among farmers, which Dyer notes is three times the rate for the general population. At the heart of this disparity lies an issue which provides a central dynamic of Dyer's book: the gulf that exists between the rural and the urban populations of America. This is not just an economic division—the sensibilities of farmers, Dyer argues, are quite different from the rest of the population. He writes:

> Farmers and others in rural America aren't like the rest of us who make our way in the cities and suburbs. For these rural people, the loss of their land and their way of life creates an incomprehensible despair, more severe even than the death of a loved one. It's as if all the family members who had worked that soil before them and all the children and grandchildren who should one day inherit that opportunity had suddenly been murdered by an unseen assailant: You don't just lose a farm. You lose your identity, your history, and, in many ways, your life. (p. 3)

This is precisely the type of sympathetic and provocative observation that characterizes *Harvest of Rage*. Dyer suggests that while suicide is a form of anger internally directed, it now requires no more than the continual refusal of the federal government to treat the rural population of America more humanely for this anger to be transformed into a rage that will be directed outside, manifesting itself in acts of brutal terrorism such as the Oklahoma City bombing.

In this section of the book, Dyer integrates well-researched statistics and individual case histories to considerable effect. The statistics make grim reading. Dyer cites a 1988 report from the National Mental Health Association which asserts that in 1979 only 5 percent of the 2,040 nonmetropolitan counties in the United States had an unemployment rate of over 9 percent. By 1984, over 50 percent of rural counties fell into that category. He quotes from a 1996 study by the National Center for Children in Poverty which notes that between 20 and 25 percent of the population of the United States live in rural areas, but

38 percent of the nation's substandard housing is rural, and 27 percent of the children in rural America are growing up hungry, forced to live in poverty even though the parents of most of them work. Dyer's use of statistics is judicious. He uses enough of them to make his case but is careful to interweave them with the actual voices of rural America and, overall, his book is not overburdened with graphs and figures. Indeed, his methodology can be detected in the comment he makes immediately after offering a series of particularly unsettling statistics from an Iowan study which showed that rural child abuse increased by a staggering 43.6 percent from 1982 to 1986 and that while in 1985 Iowa had 1,620 cases of rural spousal abuse, by 1987 that figure had risen to 4,500. He writes:

> It would be easy to spout statistics to demonstrate the sad shape of our rural places. Many volumes have been written on the subject, only to find their way to the dusty back shelves of university libraries. (p. 19)

Quite reasonably, *Harvest of Rage* seeks to avoid this fate, and its principal strategy is in its use of verbatim transcripts of telephone calls and the reproduction of unsolicited letters sent to its author. Here, claims Dyer, is the authentic voice of angry, rural America; the voices dramatize the impersonal statistics. It is in this "fertile ground" of poverty and anger, Dyer claims, that the radical right is flourishing. The history, composition, and ideologies of these groups constitute the primary focus of his second chapter "The Seeds of Influence."

Dyer suggests that the conspiracy theories being spun by contemporary antigovernment movements are intricate works of fiction designed to explain rural America's slide toward a "Third World" existence. Specifically designed to take advantage of the widespread mental depression and anger that has engulfed much of the rural landscape, these well-crafted theories combine fundamental religion, fear, patriotism, and a grain of truth—to all this, racism and hate are often added. Of course, the antigovernment movement has been in existence for decades. Christian Identity-influenced groups such as the Klu Klux Klan appeared in the 1800s, whereas other groups are much younger; for example, the John Birch Society became nationally known in the 1950s, followed by the Posse Comitatus in the late 1960s. Until recently, all these groups existed in relative obscurity, claiming less than a hundred thousand members (divided among them) at any given time. However, when millions of people were forced from their land during the farm crisis in the 1980s, they became considerably more receptive to conspiracy theories, with some joining the established antigovernment groups and others forming their own groups with names like We the People, Freemen, Christian Patriots, Family Farm

Preservation, Texas Emergency Reserve Militia, and North American Freedom Council. In addition, Dyer notes the existence of numerous other groups, such as Republic of Texas, Montana Freemen, and Aryan Nation. Dyer's book is extremely informative on the composition and beliefs of these newer antigovernment groups and he writes particularly well on Christian Identity, which is not, he notes, either new, or particularly American. Christian Identity, also known as "British Israelism," began in Britain in the mid-1800s. The best estimate for the number of Identity believers is approximately three million worldwide, a number that, as Dyer notes, can hardly be classified as insignificant.

Christian Identity doctrine holds that white Christians are the true Israelites of the Old Testament and therefore are God's chosen people. Their belief that the ten lost tribes were white (Saxon) has created two strands within Christian Identity: the white separatists and the white supremacists. The separatists believe that the races should not mingle, but they stop short of saying that the white race is superior. The supremacist views are those espoused by the KKK, Aryan Nation, and other radical groups. Overall, most of the people in the antigovernment movement fall into two categories: those claiming to be traditional Christian fundamentalists and those who adhere to some or all of the teachings of Christian Identity. The American Constitution and the Second Amendment to it, the right to keep and bear arms, are at the center of all antigovernment beliefs.

Many of these groups teach that the founding fathers intended America to be a Christian country and that they wrote the constitution with that in mind. Some groups teach that the Constitution was derived directly from the Bible and is therefore a sacred document. The significance of the Second Amendment becomes apparent here: if the time ever came when the government strayed from its constitutional Christian purpose, the weapons of the people were to be used to force the government back onto its godly course. Christians who hold to this theocratic view of government are known as "dominionists," and Dyer suggests that very large numbers of people in America's rural heartland believe that now is the time for this armed, spiritual redirection. Many, though not all, of the fundamentalists in the antigovernment movement are dominionists. Christian Identity believers are also dominionist, the difference being that they desire to establish a white theocracy in which their unique biblical interpretations would compose the rules. Dyer carefully details the crucial differences between various antigovernment groups but he notes that the incident at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992 served to bring together America's radical right, and the implications of this, he writes, have not yet been fully appreciated by those outside the antigovernment movement.

On August 21, 1992, marshals assisted by FBI agents scaled Idaho's Ruby Ridge in an attempt to arrest white separatist Randy Weaver for missing a court date to settle a minor firearms charge. Events quickly escalated and Weaver's wife and teenage son were both shot dead. It was generally accepted that the government had badly overreacted and in response to these events at Ruby Ridge, 160 people gathered in Estes Park, Colorado, on October 22, 1992. This meeting, which was later known as the Rocky Mountain Rendezvous, was made up of the Who's Who of the radical right, including representatives from the Montana militia, Aryan Nation, and Christian Identity. Dyer writes:

> The rendezvous brought together a collection of men who would normally never sit down together. Prior to the Weaver incident, their divergent religious beliefs would have overshadowed any common ground they might have had. But in 1992 all that changed. They now understood that they had a common enemy—the federal government. They knew that their only chance to defeat this common foe was to join forces. In some ways, this meeting may well have been the birth of the modern antigovernment movement. (p. 83)

A terrorist outrage such as the Oklahoma City bombing was now inevitable, Dyer suggests, once this level of cooperation among the groups of the radical right had been established.

Dyer begins "The Harvest," the third and final section of his book, with an examination of the common-law courts which are now proliferating in rural America. Dyer suggests that the contemporary common-law system is an exaggerated version of the Posse Comitatus system created in the 1970s and 1980s. These early common-law courts would send out arrest warrants to public officials who they believed were guilty of one crime or another, usually related to a farm foreclosure, but very rarely did any action follow. However, while the Posse's early versions were never very influential, contemporary common-law courts are considerably more widespread. Dyer notes, for example, that common-law courts are now active in 60 of Ohio's 88 counties and that other states are equally blanketed. In addition to passing sentence on government officials, another primary function of the common-law court is to grant sovereignty to citizens. Common-law practioners claim that once their courts grant sovereign status to someone, that person can legally stop paying taxes. A far more dangerous, and quite inevitable, off-shoot of the common-law court is the military court, often convened by one small cell of antigovernment radicals. It was from one of these military courts, Dyer speculates, that two men subsequently emerged to commit America's worst terrorist outrage.

Dyer responsibly emphasizes the point that the two men currently charged with the Oklahoma City bombing, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, are innocent until proven guilty. "With that in mind," he writes, "I will explore the road that allegedly brought them to Oklahoma City" (p. 215). Dyer offers biographies of both men, always careful to place their alleged actions within the socioeconomic context of a decaying rural landscape. He is disdainful of psychological evaluations, reacting scornfully to media interest in the fact that McVeigh's parents divorced when he was a teenager. He notes that McVeigh's favorite book was *The Turner Diaries*, William Pierce's violently racist Christian Identity fantasy, and that he frequently gave away copies at the antigovernment meetings he began attending after leaving the army. Terry Nichols was almost certainly a member of the Posse Comitatus and came to the antigovernment movement through the traditional rural path of financial failure, farm foreclosures, and the invective of the radical right.

However, *Harvest of Rage* is emphatically not a book about Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. For Dyer, the Oklahoma City bombing was the culmination, thus far, of all the issues that have preoccupied him throughout his book: global finances, federal indifference to the plight of the rural poor, sovereignty, the Bible, Christian fundamentalism, the Constitution, the Second Amendment, conspiracy theories, and common law.

Harvest of Rage is an excellent book—well argued, well researched, and well written. While Dyer consistently condemns violence, he demonstrates considerable sympathy for the people he writes about and is invariably perceptive when analyzing their values and beliefs. This powerful book should be read by anybody who is interested in understanding terrorism and, in particular, by all those who are concerned with the growing threat to internal security posed by the radical right in rural America.

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