

Terrorism in the United States: A Case Study of Eric Rudolph, a Homegrown Terrorist

By George H. Conklin



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His paper was presented at the Durham/Chapel Hill Torch Club on November 19, 2014.

At 1:18 a.m. on July 27, 1996, a bomb exploded in Centennial Park, Atlanta, the site of celebrations taking place in connection with the Olympic Games. A few minutes earlier, a phone call had warned of the bomb, but the 911 operators had disagreed about where the site was, so the warning was ineffective. A first attempt to notify the authorities of a bomb had resulted in a hangup by 911 operators (Rudolph 14). The bomb killed one person and injured over a hundred. The Olympics continued on.

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The toll might have been much larger had not a guard, Richard Jewell, noticed a backpack and started to move people away. There were no suspects, but FBI profilers quickly identified Jewell as a possible hero-bomber who fit the profile of being unmarried at age 33, without a girlfriend and, above all, living with his mother (Vollers 31). Although profiles of terrorist bombers are often highly classified (Victoroff 36), they have long identified suspects as having poor or no relationships with women, a trend that continues even today among those with security and police training (Springer 56).¹ Named a person of interest, Jewell was never

charged but was dragged through the press for 88 days until he was dropped as a suspect. Jewell was, in fact, a hero. The mistaken assumptions of profilers would turn out to be, as we shall see, a leitmotif in the case.

Two more bombings took place in the Atlanta region in 1997, neither with any known suspect.

On January 20, 1998, a bomb went off at an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama. A policeman was killed instantly, and nurse Emily Lyons horribly wounded (Lyons). A University of Alabama, Birmingham (UAB) student saw a man walking away from the blast when everyone else was running towards the scene. He followed as the suspect changed clothes and wigs (Schuster 64 ff). The student, an African American, was afraid to stop motorists to ask for help, fearing they would think he was trying to rob them. He parked his car and entered a McDonald's, where he told his story. A local lawyer joined in the hunt and both independently recorded the license plate of a truck emerging from the woods: North Carolina KND1117. The truck was quickly traced to Eric Rudolph, who thought he had gotten away unnoticed (Rudolph 47).

Rudolph Goes into Hiding and the Search Begins

There was no television reception at the trailer where Rudolph lived, but he eventually learned from the radio that a suspect had been seen driving away from the bombing in Birmingham. He went into hiding in the 500,000 acres of wilderness near Murphy, NC, at Fires

Creek, after leaving his truck fifteen miles away at Martins Creek. He camped under the rhododendrons, which made him invisible from the sky both summer and winter. He took with him supplies that the FBI estimated would be good for six months. After that, he was not seen again for five years... or that is what the authorities thought.

A successful criminal has survival skills. Eric Rudolph had been discovered to be the bomber only by accident, when one student observed his behavior, not through police investigations. But Rudolph had prepared to disappear, if caught, and possessed a unique set of skills useful for survival in the wilderness. He had good hunting skills and understood the basics of hiding out even when dogs are tracking your trail.

The FBI did employ dogs, one pack later sarcastically named the Superdogs (Schuster 102-07), which were unable to track Rudolph. It took a week to find Rudolph's truck, but by then the trail was cold. After the dogs lost the scent, the handlers tried a trick they had learned in Texas:

They put the dogs in the truck, let them out at each intersection they come to, and let them circle around. Whichever road the dog takes off, that's the way they take off. They swear this worked during some abduction case, and they've got those FBI guys believing them. They get into Blairsville, and the dogs take off for this convenience store---and the agents let them go inside, where they start barking... (at) hot dogs cooking on a rotisserie. (Schuster 103-04)

After that the Superdogs moved on down to Helen, Georgia, where they scratched at a motel door and the male half of a honeymooning couple was dragged out. The Superdogs were sent back to Texas.

A hundred agents continued to look for Rudolph, but the FBI does not work at night, so naturally Rudolph waited until night to walk the roads for further supplies; he could walk twenty-five miles a night along a highway, and ten through the woods (Rudolph 138). The scent of a person walking on pavement, it so happens, lasts only a day before it dissipates and becomes undetectable by dogs. Rudolph made use of this fact many times.

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Rudolph also had good psychological skills. He knew that while outsiders do not consider fifteen miles a great distance, the mountains cut travel paths in ways that made nearby towns relatively remote from each other. Rudolph writes:

Living in Nantahala for most of my life, I chose to hide in places like Tusquitee and Snowbird because of the general unfamiliarity. I knew that if the FBI ever questioned my former neighbors in Nantahala, none of them would ever guess I was hiding out in Tusquitee or Snowbird. (Rudolph 79)²

Although bears had dug up and eaten the supply of food he had buried before he started bombing, Rudolph's

hunting skills meant he had enough to eat, but what he ate lacked variety. It was a steady diet of meat: "You could eat an entire deer and starve to death for lack of fat and carbohydrates" (Rudolph 79). His weight dropped 50 pounds.³ So Rudolph crossed over to the Nantahala part of the forest to visit his old friend and storekeeper George Nordmann, bought \$500 worth of supplies, and left in an old truck. When the truck broke down near Fires Creek, Rudolph made an elaborate backtrack, physically lying down on the edge of the road in order to convince tracking dogs he was going back to the Nantahala mountains. His disappearance after this episode was highly frustrating to the FBI. Air searching yielded nothing, and some new and rather strange strategies emerged.

Bo Gritz, a colorful character who had tried to find missing soldiers in Viet Nam, volunteered to find Rudolph and convince him to surrender. Gritz thought that mental judo would show him where Rudolph was hiding out. Showing again the problems with profiling, Gritz and friends were sent out into the woods but failed to find Rudolph, who comments:

The profilers' plan to coax me out of the woods resembled a comedy skit. During their search of my Cane Creek trailer, the feds had found dozens of books on the Civil War. And interviews with my friends confirmed that I was a bona fide Civil War buff. The profilers looked at all this Civil War "stimuli" and concluded that my hiding in the mountains was a form of role playing. Starring in my own Civil War fantasy, I was a lone rebel fighting for the Lost Cause, and the task force was a Yankee army out to capture me. To talk me into surrendering, they needed some of my rebel comrades to convince me that the war was over and it was time to lay down

my arms. Colonel Gritz and his crew were assigned the role of my rebel comrades. They were there to “rescue” me from the Yankee horde. (158)

Rudolph wrote that he laughed so hard he broke a rib, especially after the “FBI profilers dressed them [the searchers] in white hats with the word “REBEL” stenciled in red letters across the front; and around their neck each rebel wore a Confederate flag bandanna” (158). Rudolph had been monitoring the hunt for himself by listening to the radio.

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Rudolph's Background

Who is Eric Rudolph, and what was he doing before the age of 30 when he became a wanted man? Does his personal history explain why he became a terrorist, as profilers would assume it could?

The family lived in Florida and was reasonably well off; Eric's father was a mechanic for TWA airlines, which enabled them to have European vacations. Born into a family of religious seekers, he was raised a Roman Catholic—Eric's mother Patricia once studied to be a nun—but later in life the family joined a

Pentecostal church, which did not impress Rudolph: “Pastor Bez preached a brand of humility bordering on self-abnegation. His message was to let the world wipe its feet on you. God will give you justice in the next world, he said. Leave the burdens of this world behind; get saved and get ready for the Rapture; everything else is vanity” (57). Rudolph favored a more muscular religious response to life's problems and to abortion.

Unfortunately, not only did Rudolph's father lose his job after 19 years, but he also died six months later from cancer. Using a small inheritance from her father, Patricia and the family moved to the Nantahala region, near Topton, North Carolina, on Highway 19/74 between Andrews and the Nantahala Gorge. Rudolph attended school for ninth grade, where he played basketball, and was home schooled after that. He obtained a GED degree. Eric began dating a local girl who was in the eighth grade. A daughter of Nordmann, the storekeeper Rudolph later contacted, she followed him around like a puppy (Vollers 110).⁴

Rudolph as an Adult: The Businessman and Army Training

Shortly after Thanksgiving, 1994, the family fell into the Christian identity movement, and Patricia moved the family to the Church of Israel in Schell City, Missouri, run by Dan Gayman, but after a few months, the family returned to North Carolina.

After obtaining his GED degree, Rudolph enrolled for two semesters at Western Carolina University, but did not fit in and dropped out. He told people he did construction work, but in fact he was in a different and quite successful business—growing marijuana. He subscribed to *High Times* magazine and even took a trip to Amsterdam to bring back high-quality seeds to improve the quality of his crop (Vollers 109). Rudolph used the free labor of his

girlfriends to help cultivate the plants under power lines. To avoid detection, he sold his crop not locally but in distant cities. His friends estimated his income from this business was up to \$100,000 a year. He was never discovered by the law.

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Rudolph also joined the Army, since he wanted to learn about explosives. He also learned about *lines of drift*, a military term which denotes terrain which tends to channelize movement (Rudolph 178). People, he learned, tend to walk on known paths, such as old trails, on roads or even along streams, an insight that made Rudolph virtually invisible to the FBI when he went into hiding, for many of its agents spent valuable time walking up and down the Appalachian trail, picking up discarded pieces of paper looking for fingerprints.⁵ Rudolph's summer camp was on a hill overlooking the FBI headquarters in Murphy—close enough that he could watch the FBI at work, but off the line of drift, so he was safe. His winter camp was near a road also, but up a very steep hill. No one would bother with the climb, so he was also safe there. The Army had taught Rudolph well.

Rudolph never hid the secret of his bomb-making from his several girlfriends, most of whom were blond, blue-eyed, and knew Eric's business. One could even draw a sketch of his bombs. But, blinded by the profile of a typical bomber's presumed dislike of women, the girlfriends were ignored by the FBI. Researchers asked if the FBI knew that the women could have shed light on the bombs Rudolph constructed. The response was, "No... They never asked" (Schuster 250).

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And what did Rudolph do *after* he went into hiding? He spent most of his time trying to evade capture and finding enough to eat, but he also continued to seek out ways to disrupt the FBI through violent means. Using part of the 300 pounds of dynamite he had stolen from a construction company in Asheville, Rudolph had constructed a bomb he was going to use to blow up a FBI building, but he was deterred when a lone agent was left behind between intensive searches: "Despite my ideological fervor, I realized that the agents at the armory were not responsible for shaping the policies that were destroying the country. They signed up for Duty, Honor, and Country. They probably didn't realize that they were serving

Sodomites, abortionists, and Harvard commissars" (213). He backed away from the armory and left the bomb behind in the woods.

What Motivated Rudolph

What was Eric Rudolph's motivation in taking up bombing? The explanation is just what Rudolph constantly claimed: the right to use force to protect an innocent person, the unborn in this case. This idea is familiar in the more militant segments of the Christian anti-abortion movement, and has even been advanced by some radical priests:

"Everyone has the right to protect innocent persons," David Trosch, a Catholic priest from southern Alabama, told the *Birmingham News*. "When the government fails to do this, it is mandatory for others to do it. In effect, the government has made abortion clinics war zones." (Vollers 89)

And:

...(The) Reverend Conrad Kimbrough, a retired Catholic priest and antiabortion activist filling in at the St. William's parish church in Murphy, told the Associated Press that "if a person's intention is to prevent [Rudolph] from being killed they may be right" and that he doubted that Rudolph would be found "to be an unprincipled killer." He also said that Emily Lyons, the nurse maimed in the Birmingham bombing, didn't deserve support because "she was instrumental in killing babies." (Schuster 217)

Some with religious backgrounds have argued that Eric Rudolph was not influenced by religion at all, even if he *thought* he was; one author argues that Rudolph was not following religious ideas because he never stated God told him exactly where to place bombs

(Seegmiller 524). But while his are minority views, he is not alone in holding them.

Eric Rudolph's Deviance and Criminological Theory

One theory in criminology that would explain Eric Rudolph's appearing as a normal man with good business instincts while, at the same time, engaging in acts society would call deviant has been elaborated by David Matza in his *Delinquency and Drift*.⁶

Matza asked 100 gang members questions such as "Do you approve of mugging?" 47% of the sample responded with indignation, and only 2% approved. Only 1% approved of stealing from a car. Fighting with a weapon, something gang members do, was approved by only 1%, and 40% were indignant (Matza 49). In short, gang members may be involved in deviant acts, but their moral code was otherwise quite normal.

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The explanation of these startling findings lies in the difference between street law and formal law. In the street, if someone punches you, you may punch back just as hard as you can, well

in excess of self-defense. The initial punch frees you from all constraint, even if the “legal law” insists you try to use proportionality or even flee the scene. The punch frees you from constraints and puts you into a state of moral drift where extreme and *illegal* action is permitted. In a state of drift, even shooting someone to settle a business dispute is acceptable.

Eric Rudolph did not fit the profile of someone personally deviant. He liked women, used marijuana, played team sports, fell in love, and was a highly successful businessman, none of which is predicted in the usual profiles. He had developed excellent techniques of survival and understood how large organizations such as the FBI would behave dysfunctionally. But when it came to abortion, he fell into a state of moral drift, where violent action was permitted to save lives. Eric Rudolph is not hard to understand, even if most people and the law would condemn his behavior. Eric Rudolph is still a moral member of society, as seen in his decision not to kill the lone FBI agent. Rudolph was not a cultural lone wolf. His values were generalized in the area in which he lived.

Evidence Rudolph's Anti-Abortion Stand Respected in the Mountains

Since Eric Rudolph's view that abortion is murder is widely held in the area of state of North Carolina in which he was living and hiding, it is not surprising to learn from his own account that he in fact *was* seen during the five years he was officially invisible. When a truck he had stolen to move food to his winter camp ran out of gas, deputies pulled in behind the truck and asked him if he needed a lift (Rudolph 152). They took him into town and drove him back with the gas can. Rudolph even shopped once at Walmart. Another time he left in a truck a note challenging law enforcement to find him and signed the note with his thumbprint, but

nothing happened. He found out after his arrest that the sheriff had torn the note up and the stolen truck was listed as a joy ride. Even if others had seen him by accident, it would not be surprising if they merely walked on and said nothing, despite a million dollar reward offered by authorities and Rudolph's being on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list.

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Eric Rudolph's adventure ended when he was caught dumpster diving at night to retrieve food thrown out by fast food restaurants in Murphy, close to his summer camp. He was arrested on May 31, 2003, ending five a half years in hiding. Today he lives in the supermax prison in Colorado, with no chance of parole.

Rudolph may have followed street law, but in the end society used formal legal system to end his career, despite the system's use of misleading profiles that only led their users onto wrong or false tracks. Sometimes people do say what they really mean and act accordingly. Even if the path chosen is illegal, the action can be understood—though we understand as well that Rudolph's bombs neither seriously disrupted the Olympics nor ended abortion in the United States, showing that violence and terrorism are not an assured way of achieving social change.

Notes

- 1 The thesis by Nathan Springer cited here was written for the Naval Postgraduate School, Department of National Security Affairs. The thesis was given a security clearance. This information is not supplied on the printed edition, but can be found on the Web. Also available on Kindle.
- 2 He adds “Folks in Tusquitee drive south to Hayesville to get their civilization, while folks in Nantahala drive north to Andrews. Those seeking a little more refinement drive a little further to the Walmart in Murphy.”
- 3 Living as a hunter-gatherer, Rudolph had replicated the well-known finding that in such societies plants supply 60 to 80 percent of calories (Lee and Devore 37-38)
- 4 Pat Rudolph informed the girl that if she and Eric had a baby, Pat would deliver it at home. She had midwife training (Vollers 101-102).
- 5 One agent from Georgia joked that he wanted to start a rumor that Eric Rudolph had been seen in Georgia so the FBI would clean up that part of the trail too! (Vollers 151)
- 6 The drift referred to in the title has no relationship to the idea of lines of drift used by Rudolph.

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*The publication of this article is funded by
The Torch Foundation*