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Episode 1: Merton's General Strain Theory & The Oklahoma City Bombings

Hi everyone, my name is Lauren, and you're listening to the very first episode of... The Criminal Element. On today's episode we will be reviewing Merton's General Strain Theory in the case of Terry Nichols and Timothy McVeigh, more usually referred to as the Oklahoma City bombers. This is an infamous case and is often remembered as the worst terrorist attack to occur on American soil before 9/11. We've got a lot to cover folks, so let's get right to it.

Strain theories are criminological theories from the positivist school that focus on how an individual's frustration is a factor in crime causation. Robert Merton's General Strain Theory focuses on the breakdown of economic structures in America, and how the "American Dream" is unattainable for many people, causing strain and frustration in American society. Merton's theory emphasizes that strain and frustration are due to the differential emphasis placed on cultural goals, such as material goods, while de-emphasizing the importance of institutionalized means, or the hard work needed to reach those goals (Tibbetts & Piquero, p. 154-158, 2021).

As a result of experiencing strain, Merton argues that there are five potential adaptations an individual may experience: conformity, ritualism, retreatism, innovation, and rebellion. Individuals who are conformists will try to achieve cultural goals through institutionalized means, so by cultural goals they mean typical things people try to achieve. "The American

Dream” in one sense, but things like upward mobility in your place of work or financial stability are also cultural goals. Institutionalized means legal and conventional ways to earn money, like getting a job. Essentially, these people conform to what society expects, hence the name.

Individuals who are ritualists follow institutionalized means, like working hard, but reject cultural goals, often pursuing their goals due to intrinsic values. These can be individuals who may pick certain careers because it brings them joy, even if they may not pay as much as a different job. Next up are the innovators. Innovators will try to achieve cultural goals but reject institutionalized means, using unconventional and sometimes, but not always, illegal means to achieve their goals. I think this can cover a broad spectrum of people, from famous inventors like Elon Musk to individuals who commit white-collar crimes to become more successful more quickly. Retreatists reject both cultural goals and institutionalized means, often escaping society through living “off the grid” and creating their own goals and means. Finally, there are rebels, which are individuals who not only reject cultural goals and institutionalized means but create different and new “conventional goals and means”. Oftentimes, these individuals dislike the current rules or structure of their surroundings and will try to create a new system (Tibbetts & Piquero, p. 154-158, 2021).

Essentially, this theory describes how a lot of people in our society have experienced and learned that their hard work does not always pay off, that conventional, legal work cannot provide immediate and immense success, or even that their work will not be as successful as someone else's, ultimately causing immense strain on the person. Individuals have several ways to adapt to strain, some of which increase the likelihood of crime, such as being an innovator or rebel.

Now that we have an idea of the theory lens we will be looking through for this case, it's time to get started. It was a typical morning in Oklahoma City on April 19th, 1995. The city was bustling with people headed to work, some of them going to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. This was a nine-story federal government building that had several regional offices within it for various government departments, including the Social Security Administration, the United States Secret Service, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (Goodwyn, 2020). The building also had a day-care center, called America's Kids, for the children of government employees, even if they didn't work in the building (*The Oklahoma City Bombing, 20 Years Later*, 2015). It was on this day at 9:02 AM when a moving truck filled with thousands of pounds of fertilizer and fuel oil was ignited, destroying a third of the building, injuring over 500 people, and killing a total of 168 people, 19 of them being children (Sarat, 2008). This was a brutal act of domestic terrorism that shocked the nation, and Americans were even more distraught when they found out the suspects were countrymen themselves: Timothy McVeigh (Russakoff & Kovalski, 1995). But who was this man, and what pushed him to commit such a heinous crime?

Timothy McVeigh was born on April 28th, 1968 into a conservative rural community in Pendleton, New York. His father, Bill McVeigh, worked long night shifts at a General Motors radiator factory to provide for his family but was not always an active or engaging father to his three children. His mother, Mildred or "Mickey" McVeigh, was often described as not being suited for the "domestic lifestyle", enjoying going to bars, restaurants, and clubs without her husband (Russakoff & Kovalski, 1995), which was very atypical for the time period. This ultimately led to the divorce of his parents in 1978 when Timothy was 10, resulting in his father taking custody of him and his mother moving to Florida with his two sisters (Aitken, 2001). He

also developed an interest in guns around this age because of going to shooting ranges with his grandfather (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019). Now, Timothy was described as shy, skinny, and awkward throughout his high school years, leading to bullying from his peers. He was very intelligent, eventually receiving a scholarship to college when he graduated in 1986 (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019). He spent a small time at a business school in New York before dropping out, looking to work instead. But it was the mid-80s and the economy was unsteady due to a recession in the early 80s. He worked a multitude of dead-end jobs, including bars and various security jobs because of his interest in guns. He had also begun reading various conservative militia magazines such as *Soldier of Fortune* (Aitken, 2001).

When looking at this through Merton's Strain theory, the stress of the unstable economy throughout his childhood and early adulthood may have contributed to his anger and frustration, both towards the situation itself and the government, which he ultimately blamed. Timothy was having difficulty becoming financially stable, and finding a job he enjoyed that he could keep long-term.

It was also during this period when Timothy first read the *Turner Diaries*, which is an antisemitic anti-government book depicting a man and his associates waging a war on the government after the confiscation of all firearms (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). I also think it's relevant to note that the book includes a truck-bombing of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI, headquarters in Washington, D.C. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). This book introduced Timothy to paranoia towards the government, especially at the idea of his 2nd Amendment rights being taken away (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). After reading, he began stockpiling food, weapons, and water and created

plans to build a bunker, truly fearing what the government could potentially take away from him (Aitken, 2001).

In 1988, two years later, McVeigh enlisted in the United States Army and was an exemplary soldier, earning the Bronze Star for bravery for his service in the Persian Gulf War (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). I will add that he reported not feeling satisfaction or joy out of the act of killing, only with “hitting the targets” (Aitken, 2001). He also reported feeling sad because of the many unnecessary deaths he witnessed during the Gulf War. It was during his time in the Army when he became friends with Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier, who all shared feelings of distrust towards government authority and love for guns (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019).

Timothy McVeigh was even a candidate for the Special Forces but did not make it into the program, leaving him with mixed feelings about the military. This led McVeigh to take an early discharge, and leave the army in 1991 (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). McVeigh returned to New York, living with his father Bill, and continuing with his previous nomadic lifestyle: never sticking to one job for too long, attending gun shows, buying and selling weapons, and spreading his anti-government gospel to anyone who would listen. He would also occasionally see his Army friends Terry and Michael for a drink (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019).

I think that meeting others, in addition to the other media McVeigh was consuming, really solidified his anti-government beliefs. In attempting to align his beliefs with Merton’s Strain theory, it would seem at this point that he was becoming either a retreatist or a rebel. He had given up on any form of achieving the American dream, felt short-changed and cheated by the

country he had served, and hated government authority. This is where you can see him beginning to separate himself from a conventional lifestyle and conventional others.

This sense of distrust and paranoia towards the government only worsened in 1992 when the Ruby Ridge incident occurred. This was an 11-day standoff between the FBI and a white separatist, or a retreatist according to the theory, Randy Weaver. To briefly describe it, Weaver had attended several white supremacist group meetings and bought illegal sawed-off shotguns (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Weaver had been arrested for weapon charges, and been served court papers with a misprint on them instructing that his court date was a month later than it actually was. When he missed the court date, the U.S. Marshal Service decided that Randy might resist violently and decided to use a stealth operation to arrest Randy Weaver. However, the situation became violent when the agents were discovered by the family dog. The U.S. Marshals shot and killed the dog, but it was too late, and gunfire was exchanged from both sides, ultimately killing Weaver's son and wife (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).

I don't disagree that this was a horrific incident and the U.S. The Department of Justice had also faulted the FBI for the decisions they had made (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). I can see why this would cause a lot of anger and hurt among American citizens, but Timothy McVeigh was enraged. He firmly believed that it was obvious the government was trying to take away Second Amendment rights, and even more glaring that the government did not care about civilians (Pruitt, 2018).

A year later, in 1993 was the Waco siege, which ultimately upset Timothy McVeigh enough to act on his emotions (Aitken, 2001). The Branch Davidians were a Christian sect located in Waco, Texas, with the leader of the group being David Koresh, or the "final prophet"

(Jipson & Becker, 2023). The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms suspected the Davidians of illegally stashing firearms and planned on serving a warrant to their compound for the weapons and allegations of child abuse (Jipson & Becker, 2023). Agents attempted to enter the compound, which resulted in an exchange of fire from both sides. Several lives were lost, both ATF agents and Branch Davidians, which led to a 51-day-long siege.

McVeigh was outraged. How could his government, America's government, not only try to force guns away from the Branch Davidians but kill them over it? Here he was, stuck at home, witnessing something that both saddened him and terrified him from miles away. During the several weeks of the siege, McVeigh at one point drove to Waco in an attempt to do something. Perhaps he was planning on telling the ATF off or trying to use the media coverage to preach his anti-government and extremist message. Whatever the goal was, police had made a barricade several miles away from the compound to prevent civilian entry, and when McVeigh was attempting to pass it, he felt scared and surrounded by federal agents who told him to leave (Jipson & Becker, 2023).

McVeigh turned to his friend Terry Nichols after this, staying with him in his home in Arizona. It was here that McVeigh and Nichols both would see the end of the siege. After 51 days, ATF agents used tear gas to try and force everyone out of the compound. This resulted in a massive fire starting, the compound burning down, and 76 more Branch Davidians being killed, 25 of them being children (Jipson & Becker, 2023). To McVeigh, this was it. He firmly believed that government officials set the compound on fire purposely, despite this being incorrect (*The Oklahoma City Bombing, 20 Years Later*, 2015). This was illegal, despicable behavior, and could only signal the government becoming more aggressive with their authority towards civilians. This could only mean one thing in McVeigh's eyes, and that was war.

I want to note here that Timothy McVeigh did not reach out to any former members of the Branch Davidians. He did not try to support the victims of Waco in any form, whether it was speaking to them or through donations. I want to emphasize that McVeigh witnessed a terrible event and took matters into his own hands, deciding to get his vengeance on the United States government. This is not what the Branch Davidians stood for, and Timothy McVeigh was later condemned by remaining members of the Branch Davidians for his brutal actions in Oklahoma City (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019). One woman who had lost both her husband and children during the siege, Sheila Martin, told the New York Times that she wished McVeigh had reached out to talk to the Branch Davidians so they could redirect his anger towards something positive (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019). In a way, I believe that Timothy McVeigh used these events he witnessed to support his hatred for the government and used these events as facts that proved the government was going to use its authority against civilians.

It's at this point where we can really see the theory come to a head regarding the strain and frustration Timothy McVeigh was feeling. Finances-wise, he had already given up on finding a job that gave him upward mobility, or any chance of financial stability (Aitken, 2001). This is an example of him rejecting conventional goals, by cutting his losses and keeping dead-end jobs which would lead nowhere for him down the road. Furthermore, McVeigh and the incidents within the past several years pushed his paranoia and fear of federal authority even more. He not only feared the government, but he hated it, and after Ruby Ridge and Waco, he thought the government was out to get innocent people. Any institutionalized means, any form of governance, soon became lost to Timothy because of his investment in firearms and Second Amendment Rights.

It was after the Waco siege, in 1994, that McVeigh began planning the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh had become deeply radicalized in his anti-government, pro-gun beliefs, and another contributing tipping point was the Bill Clinton administration creating an assault weapon ban through the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (Keneally, 2019). At this point, McVeigh had also become completely obsessed with the events of Waco. He firmly believed that the government was abusing its powers and would continue to do so until everyone was oppressed and had no guns to defend themselves.

Timothy McVeigh had gone to his friends Michael Fortier and Terry Nichols to ask for their help in his plan. Michael Fortier, having known McVeigh for a long time, knew that he was just as passionate about government authority and guns as he was, but this seemed a little extreme, even for his friend Tim. McVeigh had asked that Fortier work with him to take a “proactive” approach to show the government that they were pushing too far and messing with the wrong people. McVeigh had told Fortier that both he and Terry Nichols were working together to build a bomb to blow up a building, but Fortier thought it was a bit far-fetched. He refused to help and would eventually provide a statement for the court during Timothy and Terry’s trial.

I would like to, again, add something here quickly. Michael Fortier knew about the bombing plot, knew about Timothy’s anger and hatred, and still chose not to act. He chose not to report Timothy to the police and chose to let Timothy and Terry continue without interference. Everybody, it is so important to speak up when you hear or see something wrong. Even if you’re not sure if it’s true or not, it is our responsibility as people to look out for one another. If

something doesn't seem right, or even if your friend seems like they're joking, tell somebody. This was an incredibly terrifying, horrible, and preventable event if any of the people in Timothy's life had decided to take his words a little bit more seriously. So please, please remember this. If you see something, say something.

Continuing with the story, over the course of six months, Timothy McVeigh would work with Terry Nichols to join him in his planned bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah building. Nichols, who would be described as a family man who was "manipulated" by Timothy McVeigh later in his trial, still worked alongside McVeigh to build ammonium nitrate bombs (Witkin, 1997). Nichols, who knew how to build fertilizer bombs due to growing up on a farm, had bought several tons of ammonium-nitrate fertilizer a month before the bombing (Witkin, 1997). They would eventually combine the ammonium nitrate with fuel oil to create the explosion. Over several months, Timothy McVeigh would buy himself a fake driver's license, with April 19th being his birthday - this date being extremely relevant as it was the date of the Waco fire (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019). He used this fake license to rent a Ryder moving truck, from a body shop in Junction City, Kansas (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). McVeigh had also used this license and his real name to stay at a nearby motel, called Dreamland Motel while arranging his plans for the upcoming attack, a mistake that would be incredibly helpful to the FBI during their investigation. Leading up to the attack, McVeigh would work with Nichols to fill the Ryder truck with tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, diesel fuel oil, and other chemicals (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). McVeigh had chosen the Alfred P. Murrah building particularly because of its visibility for media coverage, wanting to have his message spread as easily and quickly as possible (The Editors of Biography.com, 2019).

Soon enough, it was April 1995. This was the month that Timothy and Terry's work would come to an end. The two men had been working together for months at a campground near an old Army post-McVeigh had been stationed, filling the truck with around 5,000 pounds of explosive material (*The Oklahoma City Bombing, 20 Years Later*, 2015). Several days before April 19th, Terry Nichols would leave a yellow Mercury Marquis with a missing license plate in Oklahoma City several blocks away from the federal building (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). This was Timothy McVeigh's car and was now in place as a getaway vehicle. Terry Nichols continued to help McVeigh by lending him his truck before the bombing, and cleaning out a storage locker for him after the bomb went off (Witkin, 1997). And finally, it was April 19th, 1995, the second anniversary of the Waco siege. He left the campground in the early morning and proceeded to drive the moving truck filled with explosive materials into Oklahoma City. McVeigh parked the moving truck in front of the Alfred P. Murrah building, lit two timed fuses, and left the truck to walk towards his getaway car. It was then, at 9:02 AM that the truck parked in front of the building exploded. This was a powerful explosion that blew the front of the north wall of the building completely off, exposing the offices and other rooms inside the building (The Editors of History.com, 2023). The area was described as a "war zone" by the FBI, with one-third of the building having been destroyed, with nearby cars and buildings being damaged by the blast as well (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). First responders from across the city were sent to the federal building and news helicopters surrounded the area. Doctors, nurses, and volunteers from across local areas, and then eventually the country, went to help (Cooper, 2020). A search and rescue commenced for days as the manhunt for whoever did this began. This horrific blast left hundreds injured and deceased and was left to be known as the worst act of domestic terrorism in the U.S. at the time.

Timothy McVeigh had reached his car and begun driving out of Oklahoma when he was pulled over, just about an hour and a half after the bombing, by a state police officer for not having a license plate (*The Oklahoma City Bombing, 20 Years Later*, 2015). McVeigh, despite attempting to get his way out of the ticket, was arrested for illegally carrying a concealed firearm (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). As he was being held in custody and waiting for his trial, FBI agents were searching the scene for any sort of clue. On April 20th, they soon came across an axle that was part of the Ryder truck McVeigh had used. This axle had a model number that was eventually traced back to the shop Timothy had bought it from and were able to have an image of their primary suspect composed of witnesses (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). The image was broadcast everywhere as agents went around the town looking for their suspect. This eventually led them to Dreamland Motel where they finally learned the name Timothy McVeigh. As this was happening, Timothy was still sitting in jail waiting for his trial. But, due to the image being broadcasted, he was recognized in prison, and soon taken into federal custody (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

The FBI had plenty of evidence to convict McVeigh, and through interviews, they eventually learned how his distrust and hatred towards the government had motivated him to commit such a despicable act. Terry Nichols had also come forward to the police about his involvement in the bombing, and the FBI soon discovered Michael Fortier's knowledge of the plan (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). The trial, which would last five weeks, would determine Timothy McVeigh to be guilty of 11 counts of charges against him, and the death penalty was imposed (The Editors of History.com, 2023). A year later, Michael Fortier was fined and sentenced to 12 years in prison for not alerting authorities about McVeigh's plan. In 1977

Terry Nichols was found guilty of conspiracy and several counts of involuntary manslaughter and was sentenced to life in prison (History.com Editors, 2019). It was on June 11th, 2001 that Timothy McVeigh was executed through lethal injection in the U.S. penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana (History.com Editors, 2019).

In the aftermath of the bombing, people were frightened. Those who were not present still felt that it could have been them, while many others struggled with survivor's guilt. Many families and parents especially because of the loss of many children in this awful act (Placing Terrorism in an Academic). There was a profound impact on both the community of Oklahoma and the country itself. Across the country, terrorism and how to respond to the impacts caused by bombings were studied, as well as the implementation of more emergency management courses. Education-wise, there has also been an increase in college and university programs for studying terrorism and counterterrorism (Placing Terrorism in Academic). In May of 1995, the remains of the building were demolished and the Oklahoma City Memorial Museum was built in its place, its purpose being to educate, remember, and help those impacted by the bombing (History.com Editors, 2019).

To wrap up Merton's General Strain Theory and the Oklahoma City Bombing, by looking through this theory lens we can try to understand why Timothy McVeigh thought the way he did, and the course of action he took. To review, Merton's theory suggests that individuals may turn to crime after experiencing extreme frustration, or strain, due to the inability to achieve societal goals through legal means. McVeigh was financially unstable, which can be seen through his job hopping, as well as his generally nomadic lifestyle. He felt there was no way to achieve the cultural norms or goals through institutionalized means. McVeigh also began to reject cultural norms once he felt that the government was stretching its authority over the 2nd Amendment,

and felt as if the government was purposely attacking civilians after the events of Waco and Ruby Ridge. McVeigh's criminal coping mechanism was resorting to extreme violence to send a message of resistance to the government. By looking through the lens of a theory, it attempts to explain the path that McVeigh followed that led his actions on April 19th, 1995. But it is important to note that his actions and beliefs were factors far beyond what Merton's theory can explain. This theory lens provides a sort of a framework for understanding complexities of criminal behavior.

I want to end this episode by talking about ways to further support the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. You are all able to donate to the Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum, which uses its donations to help maintain the outdoor memorial and create student scholarships for the family members of victims. You can find the link to this website in the show notes, but you can also find the website at memorialmuseum.com. The link tree to the script from this episode, its sources, and the website to donate is also in the show notes for those interested in a transcript of the episode or finding out more information. Thank you all so much again for listening to the Criminal Element. My name is Lauren, and I will see you all in the next episode!

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<https://memorialmuseum.com/>

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