

Terror & Responsibility

by Victoria A. Brownworth

The death toll is still rising. More than a week after the terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City, rescue workers continue the grim search for bodies, body parts, anything to help identify those women, children and men still missing in what remains of the Murrah federal building. Most Oklahomans—indeed, most Americans—are still in shock. Most of us can't watch the news, read the papers, page through the pictures in the magazines without our throats closing up, tears welling in our eyes. Some Americans have passed through mourning directly into rage. But the majority are still feeling numb, stunned, disbelieving.

Except perhaps the queers, Jews, blacks, women and others who are all too familiar with the kind of horror perpetrated on the people of Oklahoma City, we hold our own roll call of the dead each day like a private reveille, because so many of us have been terror's victims. Many of us know the terrorism that bit hard into the heartland of America and left the bloody wound that splattered the lives of hundreds of people across downtown Oklahoma City.

We also know the rhetoric of the perpetrators, whether they call themselves "patriots" or

"militia" or white supremacists or the Christian Right or the Republican mandate, their message is frighteningly, disturbingly—yet mundanely—the same. The message is simple, the methods simplistic: hate and destruction.

To the names of the babies and old people, the women and men in the prime of their lives who were the victims of the bombers in Oklahoma City, we can list our own victims of terrorism: Charlie Howard, killed when he was tossed from a bridge by three young white men in Maine for being gay; Rebecca Wight, stalked as she and her lover, Claudia Brenner, hiked along the Appalachian Trail by a young white man who shot at the two lesbians until he killed one and nearly killed the other; seven lesbians and a gay man killed in firebombings in Oregon as they organized against the anti-queer initiatives; a lesbian killed outside a gay bar in Washington, D.C. when she wouldn't respond to a man's advances; two gay men killed in Laurel, Mississippi for being gay; Brandon Teena, a young lesbian murdered in the heartland by a group or young white men who raped and tortured her first. And so many others.

These women and men are victims of the same killers that shattered the safety of Oklahoma City on the brilliant sunny morning of April 19. And

these victims—all these victims—are not the last. Not if you listen to what President Clinton called, "the loud and angry voices that spread hate... who lead others to believe violence is acceptable."

Some of those voices are the killers themselves. But far more of them are our neighbors, our co-workers, our clergy, our politicians. They are the voices on the radio talk shows saying, just days after the bombing, that Clinton had set the whole thing up or that America needs more people like the perpetrators of the bombing. Oliver North said it wasn't the Right's fault. Rush Limbaugh offered a version of the leftist Washington conspiracy. Charles Colson demanded that all citizens be able to greet the government at their doors with guns in hand.

Queers know those voices and the way they twist and turn the truth to fit their own agenda of hate. They are the same voices that tell us that Charlie Howard deserved what he got, or Brandon Teena was a freak, or that not enough queers in Oregon were killed by the firebombings. They are the Voices that fuel the Republicans' so-called Contract with America: the white men who hate anything that isn't white, straight, Christian. The white men that say, again and again: less government, more guns.

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"There is not one member of the gay community who hasn't benefited positively from the changes over the last thirty years. Yet we still hear, 'I don't like the gay community here very much.' To which we must respond, 'But my dear you are the gay community!'"

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Mailing Address P.O. Box 27928
 Raleigh, NC 27611
E-Mail FRNTPAGE@AOL.COM
Phone (919) 829-0181
Fax (919) 829-0830

National Sales:
 Rivendell Marketing (212) 242-6863
 (908) 754-4348

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The Bitter, Sarcastic & Contrary Guide to Fame

By Nadine Smith

This column is jam-packed with controversial statements, vicious personal attacks and scandalous innuendo about public figures. Well, not yet — but I'm hoping that I soon will propel myself to national prominence by being relentlessly bitter, sarcastic and contrary. It looks like great fun, and it's profitable, too.

It assures one prominent space in national gay and lesbian publications and a lucrative cross-over career in straight society, as well. I can picture myself dressed defiantly, striding across the stage on the Conan O'Brien show (too political for Dave) as he introduces me. "My next guest has made a name for herself as an iconoclast with a take-no-prisoners attitude when it comes to slaughtering sacred cows." Hoping my intro has offended animal rights activists, I'll whip off some zingers attacking every organization and mocking anyone who strikes me as committed and earnest. God, they have such thin skins (maniacal laughter).

When challenged, I will tell people I am providing a great service by challenging the status quo, offending the comfortable and causing people to stretch their flabby minds with my witty putdowns. Ahh, the power is delicious.

I'll probably use the Internet for my source material at first. Where else can one find examinations of biblical interpretations on homosexuality right next to posts speculating that Brad Pitt is a female-to-male transsexual. I will

examine these ironic juxtapositions and people will know I'm a tormented genius and will search for deeper meanings in my rantings. Realizing that the media is more attracted to conflict than substance, I will launch petty attacks on people more respected than me and watch them squirm trying to find the politically correct way to respond. I'll clip the angry letters of condemnation written in response to my columns and package them as a best-selling book and then laugh all the way to the bank.

Groupies will write me impassioned letters thanking me for telling it like it is and tweaking the nose of the establishment. I will mock them for using phrases like "tweaking the nose" and they will love me even more for not selling out. I'll change positions frequently, contradict myself and outright lie. People will find me enigmatic and refreshing in contrast to those self-righteous, principled people whom I typically skewer. Who wants to be reminded of how little they are doing to move our society forward or save the earth or any number of important works blah, blah, blah. It's depressing. Turn the music back on and get that damned political flyer outta my face.

Magazine writers will write witty stories about how different I am in person, how sentimental I get watching old love stories and how, despite me abrasive exterior, all I really want is to be loved. Close friends will relate tender tales of sweet and loving things I have done for them or anonymous acts of generosity toward strangers. People will

soften their harsh judgments of me and offer explanations on how internalized homophobia, racism and sexism have made me an enemy of my own people. I'm not to blame, I'm a victim of society, they will say, providing me with fresh material for my latest attack. That's the problem with these do-gooders. They have no taste for blood. They never know when to move in for the kill. They deal in gray areas in a world starved for black and white, good and evil. Hey, it works for the fundamentalists — it can work for me, too.

No one has an opinion or strategy that differs from mine. They are wrong and evil and must be destroyed. I will combine legitimate criticism of abuse or wrongdoing with unsubstantiated attacks on people I just do not like. Kind of like the National Enquirer getting their lead story right so that you believe the wolf-headed baby story on page 4. Well, that's as far as I've gotten with my plans, but I'll be working the rest of it out as soon as possible. Who knows, people might start thinking for themselves, investigating the facts, responsibly drawing their own conclusions, and acting in the community's best interest. So I'll work quickly on my new "bitter, sarcastic and contrary" persona. I've already got the sarcasm down pat.

Nadine Smith is executive director of the Human Rights Task Force of Florida and a member of the Democratic National Committee. She served as co-chair of the 1993 March on Washington. Copyright 1995, Empire Syndicate.

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