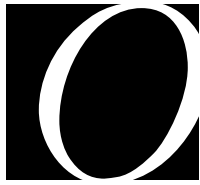


# Whatever Happened to the Search for Eric Rudolph?

by **Cynthia Lewis**



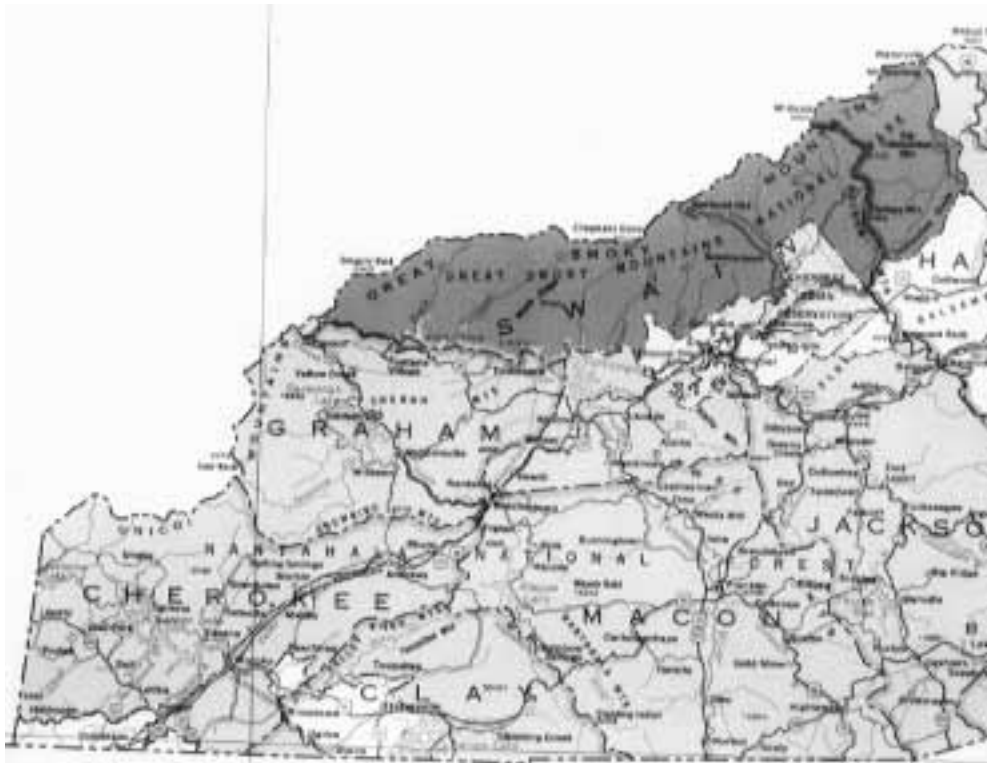
*When Cynthia Lewis journeyed to the mountains of western North Carolina to investigate the search for the alleged serial bomber Eric Rudolph, she wasn't quite sure what she'd find. Would the locals resemble mountain-folk stereotypes in their hostility to outsiders—especially a prying female academic? Were they protecting one of their own? Artist's rendering of Eric Rudolph, courtesy of the FBI Fugitive Publicity Unit.*



On a June day at the River's End restaurant, part of the large sporting complex that is the Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) in western North Carolina, a patron waiting to be seated wore a T-shirt featuring a now familiar joke. An FBI agent sits on a tree stump in the forest, surrounded by books, while a red-nosed reindeer says to him, "I hear you're looking for Rudolph." Despite claims in the area that the search for alleged serial bomber Eric Rudolph is now all but forgotten, such remnants as the T-shirt signify the ongoing search, even as the Southeast Bomb Task Force scaled back in June 2000 from over two hundred agents to a mere dozen. Tensions also linger in the region between natives and strangers, citizenry and government, local and federal law enforcement. Is the FBI inside or outside the reindeer joke? The answer to that question depends entirely upon who is being asked.

No sooner is history made than it starts getting reconstructed. The shuttle between truth and memory, fact and fabrication, accounts for the greater part of the narrative tangle about this case—a thicket of information, false assumptions, and guesswork as dense as the forest where Eric Robert Rudolph may still be hiding. Accused of four bombings— at the 1996 Olympics, at two abortion clinics, and at a lesbian bar—Rudolph was placed on the FBI's Most Wanted list in May 1998, when the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) offered a \$1 million reward for information leading to his capture. He is formally charged with having "maliciously damaged, by means of an explosive device, buildings and property affecting interstate commerce which resulted in death and injury." When I began interviewing for this piece, I thought I would discover agreement among locals that Rudolph hadn't been captured yet because the FBI fumbled the case. I was wrong about that hunch and wrong about others—for instance, my assumption that western North Carolinians would be skeptical toward a female academic with the nerve to investigate a stereotypically male topic like a serial bomber.

My own private western North Carolina, in fact, turned out to welcome my questions, even the uncomfortable ones, and taught me how little I already knew about this case from what I had read in the newspapers and seen on television. Rather than being specifically about anti-abortion or gay rights, the Eric Rudolph case is about the complex motives that might have driven Rudolph to commit the acts of which he is accused. Rather than encountering sexism and prejudice, I felt trusted by the men working on the case, who, by now, had ample reason to distrust outsiders asking hard questions. Our discussions revealed that, at present, the most compelling issues about the unresolved search for Eric Rudolph are why he hasn't been captured by the Southeast Bomb Task Force, which includes the FBI; whether Rudolph has received assistance from locals or outside sympathizers; Rudolph's motives for the four bombings with which he's charged; and what, at this point, has become of him.



*The strands of fact, rumor, and speculation surrounding the hunt for Rudolph are as tangled as the seemingly impenetrable Nantahala Forest where the Southeast Bomb Task Force began searching for him in 1998. Many people believe he's still hiding there. Map of western North Carolina (above), courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey; photograph of the Nantahala Mountains' undergrowth, courtesy of the author.*

The bitterest views of why Rudolph remains at large after three and a half years, despite the high price on his head, fault the FBI for bungling the search from the beginning. “The FBI wanted all the glory,” says a white-water rafting guide and manager at the Nantahala Outdoor Center, in reference to the now legendary episode in which, one day after the January 1998 bombing of a Birmingham, Alabama, abortion clinic, law enforcement officers appeared at Rudolph’s mobile home only moments after the suspect had fled for good. The popular story about what happened in this instance disparages the FBI agents who had been searching for Rudolph in Asheville, North Carolina, when they received a call from Jack Thompson, then sheriff of Cherokee County. Thompson had located Rudolph’s mobile home in Murphy, North Carolina, within Thompson’s own county, nearly a hundred miles southwest of Asheville. The FBI asked Thompson to wait until they arrived before approaching the residence. Rudolph had time to see himself as a wanted man on CNN, make a stop at a local grocery store for supplies, and disappear into the nearby forest without so much as turning off the television, shutting the front door, or bothering to pick up sixteen one hundred dollar bills left in his kitchen. In this scenario, the FBI is the butt of the reindeer joke: not only did federal agents hold back local law enforcement, who could have become heroes, but they also prematurely gave the press information that prompted Rudolph to flee. Bumbling and bookish, they prevented a competent local sheriff from getting the job done.

Sheriff Thompson tells another story. Now retired, he spoke with me as we sat in the mid-morning July sun outside his home in Murphy. His manner is deliberate, patient, and kind. The FBI were indeed hunting for Rudolph in Asheville, where the tags on the truck that had been seen leaving the crime scene in Birmingham had been traced. Thompson researched a hunch that Rudolph might live elsewhere. He first called the local post offices and then the power company to find that an Eric Rudolph—or Randolph, his preferred alias—rented a mobile home nearby. A call to the landlord confirmed that Rudolph inhabited the trailer, and the call to the FBI followed immediately. But Thompson counts it his good fortune that he and his officers were asked to delay before storming Rudolph’s residence. For one thing, they didn’t have a warrant for his arrest. No one was even sure at that point that Rudolph had been driving the truck in Birmingham; he was simply wanted for questioning. In addition, someone could have been killed. “Now that it’s all over, I’m glad probably we didn’t,” says Thompson about his decision not to go to Rudolph’s trailer without reinforcements. “If we’d killed him, and he was proven innocent . . . or if he’d killed a couple of deputies, two or three, all of us, you know. Now I think he would have. I’m kinda thankful I didn’t go.”

# WANTED BY THE FBI

**MALICIOUSLY DAMAGED, BY MEANS OF AN  
EXPLOSIVE DEVICE, A BUILDING AFFECTING  
INTERSTATE COMMERCE IN WHICH A  
DEATH RESULTED**



## ERIC ROBERT RUDOLPH

Aliases: Bob Randolph, Robert Randolph, Bob Rudolph,  
Eric Rudolph, Eric R. Rudolph

### DESCRIPTION

Date of Birth: September 15, 1966; Place of Birth: Merrill Island, Florida;  
Hair: Brown; Eyes: Blue; Height: 5' 11"; Complexion: Fair; Weight: 165-180  
pounds; Sex: Male; Build: Medium; Race: White; Nationality: American; Scars  
and Marks: Noticeable scar on chin

### CAUTION

ERIC ROBERT RUDOLPH IS CHARGED IN CONNECTION WITH THE  
BOMBING OF AN ABORTION CLINIC IN BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA, IN WHICH  
A POLICE OFFICER WAS KILLED AND A NURSE CRITICALLY WOUNDED.  
RUDOLPH IS KNOWN TO OWN AN AR-15 RIFLE.

CONSIDERED ARMED AND EXTREMELY DANGEROUS

### REWARD

A REWARD OF UP TO \$1,000,000 IS BEING OFFERED FOR INFORMATION  
LEADING DIRECTLY TO THE ARREST OF ERIC ROBERT RUDOLPH.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION MAY BE FOUND ON THE FBI INTERNET PAGE:  
<http://www.fbi.gov>

FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitive: May 1998

*Eric Rudolph earned himself a place on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list in May 1998 as the suspect in four destructive bombings.*

*Now keeping company with such outlaws as Osama bin Laden, Rudolph nonetheless is a newcomer compared to Donald Eugene Webb, who holds the record for time on the list at twenty years (and counting). Courtesy of the FBI Fugitive Publicity Unit.*

How CNN got the information that Rudolph was wanted for questioning before a warrant had been issued for his arrest is another matter. The media had likely begun using the tactics for gleaning information, such as scanning police radio conversations, that they would deploy throughout the long months of attempting to report on a case about which the DOJ released so little real information. From the start of the search, the national media invaded the region. They combed the same woods that federal, state, and local agents were surveying. Clay Hardin, chief of police in Andrews, North Carolina, still refers to the more than sixty satellite trucks that were once parked in his small town, where the federal command post was centered, as a “madhouse.” While Bunny Johns, president of NOC, downplays the media invasion in her vicinity, longtime NOC photographer Villa Brewer has saved her July 1998 e-mail to a friend describing how the media approached a coworker on her way to work: “They shoved about 13 ‘fuzzy things’ in her face. She gave them a deathless quote: ‘Please! I’m late for work!’”

NOC mechanic Tommy Smith recalls that the media would swarm around anyone they thought could provide a shred of information. Jack Thompson remembers being followed home from work every night for about a year by caravans of reporters, making the media factor the single biggest irritation in what was, for him, an altogether “aggravating” experience with “no rest, no letup.” The media continued to publish details that might have tipped off Rudolph, if he had been listening to a radio in the woods. “CNN’s Eric’s best friend,” says Kenny Cope, who is currently the owner of Andrews Lube, but at the time of the search was Macon County deputy sheriff and Rudolph’s long-time acquaintance. “If it hadn’t been for the media, Eric Rudolph would have been caught in the first two days. The media’s the worst thing that ever happened to this case. The worst thing.”

Ask any local law enforcement officer in the tricounty region where the search has been conducted and expect to hear the same complaint. The outside agencies that joined the Southeast Bomb Task Force (SBTF), including the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, gradually won the respect of local sheriffs and chiefs of police, who quickly soured on the media. Captain Bob Scott, the affable, outgoing spokesman for the Macon County sheriff’s department, attributes the scramble after information to the DOJ, which jealously guarded facts that it likely could have released without damaging the search. The Richard Jewell episode in the Atlanta Olympics bombing, in which the wrong man was blamed, may have inhibited the DOJ from releasing otherwise appropriate facts about Rudolph. Over time, the story so out-sized the official commentary about it that, as Scott recalls, large numbers of reporters, desperate for scraps, “began interviewing each other.” What’s more, the mountain community has taken exception to its portrayal by the national media as backward, intolerant, and clannishly defensive of one of its own. Villa Brewer protested in another e-mail to her friend about such slants: “They’ve interviewed every snaggle-toothed farmer in overalls they can find and some wild-eyed militia sympathizers but most of us are just trying to get on with the day to day routine.” Bob Scott voiced concern that local residents and law enforcement officers had been portrayed “like rejects from *Deliverance*.”

Scott and others wax far more positive about the interaction between local and imported law enforcement, however, echoing a July 1998 press release from the DOJ that touts the “tremendous spirit of cooperation among all the agencies” participating in the SBTF. In addition, the FBI and other federal agents were, according to Andrews mayor Jim Dailey, “good neighbors.” “I hate to see them go,” says Dailey, citing the drain on the local economy that losing these extra paying customers has meant. While many townspeople welcomed FBI agents to their Thanksgiving dinner tables in November 1998, not all local residents were enthralled to be hosting the task force. In the same month, for instance, shots were fired into the command post in Andrews, all but grazing one federal agent. “Two

locals, named Carringer and Burchfield, were arrested, tried and convicted,” said a local law enforcement officer. “I think Jack Daniels, Barley Corn and ‘Thunderchief’ were also involved. Apparently this was some kind of rampage aimed at the task force that had nothing to do with Eric Rudolph. Sobriety had nothing to do with it either.”

The successful coordination of the agencies within the SBTF required a period of adjustment. Federal agents familiarized themselves with their surroundings and learned how to use the expertise of local officers and trackers, whose knowledge of the notoriously thick Nantahala National Forest proved indispensable. On first encountering these woods, the agents must have felt as alien as American soldiers once did when deposited in Vietnam. In the early 1970s, in fact, the U.S. Army Special Forces and units of the 82nd Airborne Division trained here for service in Vietnam. Gnarled rhododendron bushes block all passages but the few trails that have been cut through the dense growth. The terrain is rugged, rocky, and, in the words of current Cherokee County sheriff Allen Kilpatrick, “steeper than a horse’s face.” Looking out from Wesser Tower, a task force lookout at Tellico Gap, I wondered how watchers could spy a large animal, much less a lithe human being, in the denseness below, which spreads for miles in all directions. As Bob Scott points out, the expansiveness of a wilderness like the Smoky Moun-



*The search for Eric Rudolph became a point of local humor, generating everything from funny T-shirts and bumper stickers to signs like this one (“Patrolled by Eric Rudolph”) in a window at the Lakeside Campground. Deer in the area must have experienced identity crises when local wits, playing on the fugitive’s last name, painted red noses on deer warning signs by the roadside. Photograph courtesy of Arvilla Brewer.*

tains attracts anti-government types who seek to roam freely and escape the watch of government authority, and the notoriously rugged terrain of the Nantahala forest bedevils even the most prepared, tenacious trackers. Jack Thompson recalls a search for a lost five-year-old child within a single square mile of these same woods in which the entire SBTf helped out local law enforcement, as it sometimes did in emergencies. Over two hundred people looked for more than twenty-four hours before the child woke up and was found.

Dwight McCarter, a retired National Park Service ranger and an instructor of man-tracking seminars at Western Carolina University, can tell a curious tale or two about the hardships of negotiating the Great Smoky Mountains. McCarter has made a virtual second career out of locating crashed planes in the Smokies, some of which have been lost for decades, and is currently writing a book on the subject. He told me a story about an enormous, twin-engine World War II bomber that fell in 1945 and took him ten years to find. On the day he finally discovered it, he also rediscovered a ruined umbrella he'd left hanging on a laurel bush on the first day of his search, just thirty feet from the plane. He was standing at the site of the abandoned umbrella, he says, when he "looked over the hill, and that's where the plane was." He realized then that, on the day his search began, he'd been standing virtually next to the plane without being able to see it.

It's no wonder that the SBTf, faced with tracking a fugitive within a thirty-square-mile area, came up empty-handed. Despite the agents' large numbers and their technologically sophisticated search equipment—such as helicopters, motion sensors, heat sensors, and night-vision goggles—the woods have resisted their tactics. Unlike the lost child, Rudolph is not going to answer when he hears his name called. Unlike a huge, stationary airplane, Rudolph is sleek, stealthy, and in motion. Moreover, he is a highly skilled survivalist. Kenny Cope, who, as a teenager in the Nantahala community knew Rudolph and his three brothers, believes that Rudolph had spent years training for the eventuality of escaping into woods, where he knew he'd be well concealed. Even efforts by retired Green Beret colonel James "Bo" Gritz to coax him out of hiding have failed, despite Gritz's express confidence that he and his personal squad would outshine the task force and seize the quarry. Rudolph's only known sighting since he absconded into the woods in January 1998 occurred the following July, when he told family friend George Nordmann, "Where I'm hidden, they'll never find me."

#### IS HE ALONE?

The Nordmann episode has kindled suspicion that Rudolph, in addition to capitalizing on his unnavigable surroundings and his survivalist training, has also managed to elude capture by receiving aid, either from individuals like Nordmann or from a group. In July 2000, a Court TV cable network program about





*Although neither locals nor outsiders were tied to trees, tension was inevitable when crowds of reporters and law enforcement officials invaded the area. Residents especially objected to being depicted in the national media like the stereotyped mountain folk in *Deliverance*. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive. © 1972 Warner Brothers, Incorporated. All Rights Reserved.*

the search featured radio talk show hosts in Birmingham who couldn't conceive that Rudolph wasn't being helped. Many western North Carolinians agree. NOC mechanic Tommy Smith believes that Rudolph has found sanctuary outside the woods with one or another extremist group. "Those people will take care of you if you do what they want," Smith says. Many elements of the case, however, argue against the probability that Rudolph has been receiving assistance, unless from a very small number of people. That Rudolph did not bomb at the instigation of a politically radical group has become, among law enforcement, an article of faith. At-large criminals are most often apprehended through their associates—whether criminal or not—but Rudolph is known to have associated with virtually no one, even in his day-to-day life. Except for one still-anonymous woman who attended the area's public school, the Nantahala School, with Rudolph and who later taught there, he did not seem to date. His relationship with the teacher probably broke off as a consequence of the emotional distance he kept from her, including deceiving her as to his whereabouts.

Then there is the matter of the \$1 million reward. If anyone knew where Rudolph was, the money would be potent inducement to tell. Although the notion

that the closed Nantahala community would rather forfeit the reward than betray Rudolph is commonly expressed, \$1 million is, well, \$1 million, and people are people. In addition, rumors that the community sympathizes with his politics so much as to defend him have been exaggerated. Andrews mayor Jim Dailey speaks for a large segment of his constituency when he separates Rudolph's criminal violence from what Dailey considers to be another crime, abortion. "There's some talk about local people who thought he might be a folk hero. I don't agree with that," says Dailey. "I don't believe in what the people that work in those clinics are doing, 'cause they're takin' lives every day. But that don't give him the right to go out and kill somebody."

The likeliest candidate to have aided Rudolph willingly is George Nordmann, owner of the Better Way health food store in Andrews and Rudolph's long-time acquaintance. In July 1998, six months after Rudolph disappeared into the forest, he reemerged at Nordmann's house, claiming his innocence, demanding food and supplies, and promising to retrieve them in two days. Rudolph camped out on a nearby ridge where he could keep watch over Nordmann's house and, two days after his first appearance, made good on his promise to return. He poisoned Nordmann's dog, retrieved what Nordmann had left him, ransacked the house



*"Steeper than a horse's face," one local sheriff called it. Everything from World War II bombers to five-year-old children has been lost in this almost impassable section of the Nantahala National Forest—making it a perfect hide-out for fugitives like Rudolph. View from atop Wesser Tower, a vantage point used by the Southeast Bomb Task Force, courtesy of the author.*

for more supplies, and deposited five one hundred dollar bills on the kitchen counter. He piled his booty in Nordmann's truck, which he abandoned at the Bob Allison Campground on the west side of Nantahala Lake, prompting the task force to set up a second, mammoth command post, this one at nearby Appletree Campground. So conspicuous was the truck that many local law enforcement officers now wonder if Rudolph was trying to throw searchers off his actual trail by leading them to the spot where Macon, Clay, and Cherokee Counties converge. Had Nordmann chosen Rudolph? Or had Rudolph chosen Nordmann for any one of a variety of reasons, especially that he was an older man, easy to intimidate?

Surely Nordmann himself feels chosen, and unjustly chosen at that. "This had to happen to somebody," Nordmann told me in his health food store, "but I don't know why it had to happen to me. If I could catch Eric, I'd wring his neck." As put out as Nordmann now sounds, at the time he delayed four days before reporting the incident, leading some investigators to suppose that he and the fugitive were in league. Furthermore, Rudolph seems to have camped out near Nordmann's house for about two months, raising the question of whether he ever used the house, with or without Nordmann's knowledge or permission. Kenny Cope, the person Nordmann finally contacted about the direct confrontation with Rudolph, believes that Nordmann was not deliberately aiding Rudolph but was too frazzled and frightened to know how to respond. "He came to me," says Cope, "cause he was scared to death," an interpretation borne out by Nordmann's having slept in his health food store between Rudolph's two visits to his house. Cope thinks that Nordmann had simply hoped the whole situation would go away, but, when he discovered his truck missing, realized he would have to act. That's when he turned to Cope, a long-time resident of the area. Cope speculates that Nordmann didn't yet know about the \$1 million reward, which had been announced a month earlier. So shaken was Nordmann after Rudolph had approached him that Cope takes the encounter as evidence that Rudolph had no willing assistance in the wings, no other option than to terrorize an old neighbor. Persistent rumors in the Nantahala region that Rudolph has been romantically involved with one of Nordmann's eight daughters have not been corroborated. If they were, they might lead to suspicion that she has aided him.

If Nordmann didn't intentionally protect Rudolph in this instance, perhaps he previously nurtured the political thinking that would eventually lead Rudolph to bomb two abortion clinics and a gay bar. A devout Catholic in his seventies, Nordmann fills his health food store with religious icons and relics that sit incongruously among bags of raisins, whole grains, and exotic flours. Dust long ago began settling on the food, the vitamins, and the family portraits that line the shelves. A sun-bleached anti-abortion poster is affixed to the smudged glass of the front door. An odd mixture of military marches and big band dance music



*Although considerably reduced in June 2000, the Southeast Bomb Task Force comprised over two hundred people at the height of the search, and local establishments such as the Lake's End Grill catered to the agents' appetites. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

plays when Nordmann thinks to turn on the stereo. To enter his store is to go back decades in time.

Nordmann has refused to talk with the media since *60 Minutes* filmed him with a hidden camera. He responds to questions about Rudolph by waving his hands and shouting, "No comment, no comment." But he will rush to share his conspiracist thoughts about the Federal Reserve and the endangerment of common American citizens whom the New World Order, to his way of thinking, is on the verge of enslaving. That he embraces such conspiracy theories has raised questions about the extent of his influence on the young Eric Rudolph's beliefs. The handwritten letters left at both the Sandy Springs abortion clinic and the Other-side Lounge bombings in Atlanta threatened "DEATH TO THE NEW WORLD ORDER." According to conspiracist theory, part of the New World Order is an army run by the United Nations that embraces foreign elements and urban gangs. It waits in our national forests, which the federal government has gradually taken over, to ambush ordinary, unsuspecting Americans. When I asked Nordmann whether he had ever talked about his conspiracist views with Eric Rudolph, he flatly replied, "No." But he also said, during another part of our conversation, that Rudolph "read voluminously." Specifically, Nordmann cited *Imperium*, a neo-Nazi treatise by Francis Parker Yockey and a book of which Nordmann evidently

approves. Other books found in Rudolph's abandoned trailer include translated German survivalist manuals.

I spoke with Nordmann in July 2000, after he had already revealed to *60 Minutes* that he didn't believe the Holocaust had ever occurred. As is now widely known, Rudolph delivered a report to his ninth-grade history class expressing the same view, to the shock of his classmates and his teacher, Angie Bateman. When Bateman asked him about his sources for the report, Rudolph produced a pamphlet on the subject. I asked Bateman whether she thought Eric Rudolph might have picked up such revisionist history from Nordmann, with whose family the Rudolphs developed a close relationship. Bateman thought then, and continues to think today, that his beliefs originated not with Nordmann but with his own family. "I felt concerned," Bateman remembers, "because I thought, 'What kind of upbringing is this child getting? Is he getting proper care at home?'"

#### MOTIVE

What kind of upbringing indeed? The FBI has no doubt worked up elaborate, confidential psychological profiles of Rudolph, who dropped out of high school at age sixteen, later earned his high school-equivalency diploma, and took a year's worth of courses at Western Carolina University before enlisting in the army in 1986. He was assigned against his wishes to the elite 101st Airborne Division, where he was trained in assembling explosives. Yet the reasons for Rudolph's behavior—his psychological and political motives—remain a mystery, at least to those of us who haven't had direct access to family members. From a safe distance, that family sends out confusing signals. The mother, Patricia Rudolph, recently spoke to Court TV about feeling ostracized in the Nantahala community, where she moved from Florida with her five children when Eric was thirteen and his father had just died. She was considered a pariah, she says, because of her "left-wing" sympathies and her identity as a "pacifist" and an "anarchist." "Left-wing" is an odd, if not misleading, adjective for the politics of a woman who took her children to the Ozarks to spend time with a white separatist Christian Identity group. She has now moved back to Florida but has vowed to return to North Carolina to search for her son, whose innocence she protests. One brother, Daniel, video-taped himself as he cut off his hand with a power saw, an extravagant display of disapproval of the FBI's aggressive search for Eric that has led to labeling the entire family "dysfunctional" and "deeply troubled." Still another brother, Jamie, leads an openly gay life in New York City, and *Salon* magazine has reported that when Eric visited Jamie and his live-in partner, he seemed to accept their relationship.

This glimpse of Eric Rudolph's tolerance of homosexuality hardly squares with the bomber of the Otherside Lounge in Atlanta, where the note claiming re-



*The last reported sighting of Rudolph was in July 1998, when he emerged to buy, steal, or accept—depending on your viewpoint—supplies from old friend George Nordmann. Having taken his supplies and poisoned his dog, Rudolph drove off in Nordmann’s truck, which he later abandoned on the west side of Nantabala Lake, prompting the Task Force to establish a new command center at the lake’s Appletree Campground. Courtesy of Arvilla Brewer.*

sponsibility for the bombing railed against “THE SODOMITE BAR”—in reference to the bar’s lesbian clientele—and “THE UNGODLY REGIME IN NEW YORK.” “The language in the letter indicates that the author is a violent opponent of abortion, homosexuality, and the federal government,” reports an FBI/ATF news release about the bombing. But how did Rudolph, who had never spoken publicly about such causes until the bombings and who volunteered for the military, come to such anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-government views if not from entirely within his family? The influence on Rudolph of a neighbor and perhaps father figure, Thomas Wayne Branham, has been asserted repeatedly but not convincingly substantiated. Branham, whose arrest record includes an instance of illegal possession of firearms and explosives, as well as driving while impaired and resisting arrest, and who has been described as an anti-government extremist, has not spoken publicly about his relationship with the Rudolph family. “Everybody talks about that,” says Branham’s acquaintance, Kenny Cope, referring to Branham’s alleged effect on Rudolph, “but I’ve never heard Branham say anything. He keeps to himself.” Another candidate for Rudolph’s surrogate father was Christian Identity leader Nord Davis, who, before his recent death, lived in the Andrews area and openly criticized the government. Davis also became well known for sponsoring courses in survivalism, where students learned how to pull their own

teeth, if need be, in the wilderness. Although once proclaimed by the media to be Rudolph's mentor in anti-government and survivalist matters, Davis, the FBI now knows, never so much as met Rudolph.

An alternative explanation for why Rudolph has displayed such violence toward abortion clinics, the gay social scene, and the New World Order is that those causes serve as a front—a mask of political incorrectness behind which he is acting out his animus toward his actual target, law enforcement. Attempts to trace Rudolph's motives for bombing to a consistent and learned political position may be misguided, as suggested by the disparity between his apparent ease with his gay brother and his assault on a gay bar; by the lack of a clear thread of development in his political thinking; and, above all, by the absence of ideological cohesion among the four bombings. The same hand—allegedly Rudolph's—has crafted the bombs in all four cases, as is clear from the unvarying use of nail shrapnel from one business in Macon County, North Carolina, and from the manner in which all the bombs were assembled. But the first bombing—that in Centennial Park at the 1996 Olympics—stands out for numerous reasons: it lacked a clear target and an accompanying explanatory note; it was intended to kill masses of people (an intent thwarted only because teenagers



*Even in his school days Eric Rudolph earned a reputation as something of a troublemaker—or at least as a student who'd do anything to get attention. In a ninth-grade presentation to his classmates here at the Nantabala School, the young Rudolph produced a pamphlet to support his assertion that the Holocaust never had happened. Such episodes fuel suspicion of a far-right political motivation. Photograph courtesy of the author.*

picked up the knapsack in which the bomb was hidden and put it down facing in a different direction, so that it merely injured over a hundred bystanders and killed only one); and, most strikingly, it involved a single bomb. At each of the next two bombings, in 1997—the abortion clinic and the lesbian bar in Atlanta—two bombs exploded, the second being the stronger of the two. In both cases, the second bombs would be aimed not at physical structures but at human beings.

On the basis of that clue and others, law enforcement officers in western North Carolina harbor little doubt that Rudolph's primary target has been their own kind. In both Atlanta bombings following the explosion at the Olympics, the first, weaker bomb seems designed to have brought police running, only to find themselves placed directly in the path of a more potent, shrapnel-laden bomb. This hostility toward law enforcement appears to have culminated in 1998 in Birmingham at the New Woman, All Women abortion clinic, the fourth incident and the only one where a bomb was detonated by remote control instead of a timer. At the clinic, security guard Sandy Sanderson picked up a planter under which the bomb had been placed; the killer carefully timed the detonation, causing the first and, to date, only fatality at an abortion clinic by explosives. The cold-bloodedness and single-mindedness of his alleged act have earned Rudolph the designation of "sociopath" by law enforcement officers like Bob Scott and appears to confirm the belief that Rudolph has it in for agents of the law.

In an intriguing variation on this belief, Kenny Cope, Scott's one-time colleague and long-time friend, sees Rudolph as toying with law enforcement. A burly young man, Cope has the gift of the gab and a ready sense of humor. He curls his lips together on one side of his mouth as he speaks out of the other side. "I don't know if it was hostility," says Cope, in reference to Rudolph's motive, "or if it was just a challenge, a game." Scott himself calls Cope the person most central to the search, since Cope not only knew Rudolph as a teenager but was also the person in whom George Nordmann eventually confided. If in fact Cope has special insight into Rudolph's motive, then the bombing was about beating, not criticizing, the government. "He may have hated people like the gays," says Cope. "He may have hated abortion. But I don't feel like Eric was that strong against anyone. I think he just done it to make a statement to see if he could get away with it and to see it on the news." The bombings not only created social chaos, they cost the government a bundle, which, Cope guesses, made Rudolph feel superior. Furthermore, Rudolph's choice of politically charged targets like abortion and homosexuality, Cope feels, was about gaining whatever popular sympathy he could for his otherwise indefensible violence. "He's using abortion," Cope argues. "He's using gays and lesbians to get sympathy. He gets support from people he don't even know."

As persuasive as Cope is, his reading of Rudolph's intentions and strategies



may prove too narrow. Just because Rudolph seeks to trump law enforcement in an elaborate game does not necessarily mean that his expressions of disgust for gays and abortion are insincere. The same man who abused George Nordmann and yet left him five hundred dollars compensation may also be capable of tolerating a gay brother specifically while despising gay culture generally. What's more, Rudolph's hostility toward law officers may be linked to their very obligation to protect gays and providers of abortion under the law.

In keeping with his perspective on the case, Cope thinks of the Olympic bombing in 1996 as a learning experience gone bad. That first bombing, which doesn't seem to match the others politically, has most often been explained as an assault on the New World Order, since, according to an official Web site, the Centennial Olympic Park "was developed to serve as the world's gathering place" during the Olympics, thus dissolving national boundaries. Rather than making a political statement, Cope feels, Rudolph "got screwed up there" while trying to cause enormous, possibly gratuitous damage. "He's no dummy," adds Cope,



*An assault on the New World Order, an attack on law enforcement, or just gratuitous violence? The motives for the bombings remain unclear. Here security men sweep the area in the aftermath of the 1996 explosion at Atlanta's Centennial Park during the Olympic Games, the first bombing attributed to Rudolph. Photograph courtesy of Barry Bergey.*

stressing that Rudolph quickly learned how to exercise more careful control over his bombings.

Cope also describes Rudolph as a cool calculator whose chief aim is to keep precise control over his emotions and impulses. Asked whether Rudolph should be expected to bomb again, Cope wraps his arms around his head, leans back in his office chair, and replies, "I don't think he'll bomb again as long as people are expecting him to. I think he just wants to be a big mystery." Referring specifically to the law enforcement agencies that are still tracking Rudolph, Cope continues, "Eric's smart. He wants to do the totally opposite of what they expect him to." This portrait of a self-contained, self-controlled operator resonates with that of the isolated youth whom the community remembers as having kept his own counsel. Cope recalls that Rudolph's older brother Joel was the "wild," "outgoing" counterpart to the younger Eric's more reserved, "quieter" personality. Although the shyness and withdrawal typically associated with Eric Rudolph do not intuitively link up with the hostility of the bombings, Cope still says he can see the connection. When I asked him if he was surprised that Rudolph was charged with all four bombings, he paused before responding, "I was surprised, but, then again, it made sense. I know him, and gettin' to think about him, I could see how he done it." Angie Bateman concurs. "It was really sort of a shock to everyone when this whole thing blew up," recalls Bateman. "Everybody said, 'Eric?'" Yet Bateman also remembers her student as a young man who, although he "didn't have many friends" and "wasn't involved in sports with other boys," was drawn to the limelight through misbehavior. "As a person," says Bateman, "all I can remember about him, he liked to disrupt class. Anything to get attention." Perhaps as early as ninth grade, Rudolph's conduct predicted that of the adult who would be discharged from the military for smoking marijuana and who would seek notoriety through violently subverting authority. Whatever drew Rudolph to such destruction, Cope suggests, "it started building up when he was a kid."

#### SIGHTINGS

If the question of Rudolph's motive continues to baffle, even more perplexing is the matter of what has become of this fugitive from whom nothing has been seen or heard since at least January 1999. That date marks the last reputed break-in committed by Rudolph in the Nantahala area, "reputed" being the operative word. When I began my research into this case, the last supposed break-in by Rudolph had occurred in February 1999 at the River's End Restaurant in the NOC complex. But interviews with table-servers Tina Jones and Ruth Grindal clarified that although a break-in had certainly taken place, it was most likely not committed by Rudolph. The misunderstanding that grew around this particular piece of "evidence" points to the tricks that rumor may have played in other pockets of



*Especially during the early stages of the hunt, officials suspected that Rudolph was responsible for a number of local break-ins. The last such incident to have been connected with Rudolph—in February 1999 at the River's End Restaurant—turned out not to have been a robbery at all. The River's End, courtesy of Arvilla Brewer.*

this case and the possible unreliability of other substantiation that is, at this point, presumed to be true.

On the morning of the incident, Ruth Grindal arrived with her husband to open up the restaurant at four o'clock. Immediately her husband became aware of another presence in the building, no doubt taken by surprise when the couple, having mistakenly read their clock, appeared at the restaurant an hour earlier than usual. The intruder vanished without a trace, but at first the employees, Grindal among them, believed that huge quantities of food and supplies had been stolen from the restaurant—by one report, thirty pounds of frozen pork loin, thirteen dozen eggs, and a case of coffee packets for restaurant-sized coffee makers. So heavy and cumbersome would such items have been that Rudolph would have needed a vehicle to remove them, although Grindal reported that she saw no cars or trucks in the area when she arrived that morning. The FBI attributed the break-in to Rudolph, as indicated by an allusion in an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article from March 2000. But what the FBI had not learned was that shortly after the incident was reported, all of the goods originally believed missing were accounted for, down to the last item. The restaurant's manager at the time simply hadn't bothered to let the FBI know that, in the end, nothing was actually taken. Although Grindal panicked on that February day, fearing she had stumbled upon a desperate Eric Rudolph, she now says, "I'll never believe it was him." Tina Jones

agrees. The women conjecture it was actually someone who, having observed when the building tended to be vacant, broke in to sleep there. The FBI recently returned to the River's End to verify the recovery of the food once thought stolen, but the opportunities for miscommunication in this instance may raise questions about the supposition that Rudolph was behind other break-ins.

Such intrusions in the area during the earlier period of the search have constituted the primary evidence of Rudolph's continuous presence in the Nantahala National Forest. Although fingerprints have proved difficult to lift from sites where Rudolph may have broken in, his signature burglary appears to involve the poisoning of barking dogs, the theft of ordinary articles—a bar of soap or paper towels versus a stereo or VCR—and his habit of shaving and showering while on the premises. Despite the lack of reported burglaries since early 1999, most local law enforcement officers say their best guess is that Rudolph has remained nearby in the woods that he may now consider home. They all also acknowledge that Rudolph may be dead, as asserted late in 1999 by ATF director John Magaw, or that by now Rudolph may have left the woods—even the country. But like Kenny Cope, they all strongly suspect that Rudolph has lingered close to where he feels comfortable, perhaps moving around a bit but within a relatively narrow space. “I would,” asserts Cope.



*Captain Bob Scott, spokesman for the Macon County Sheriff's Department, thinks it's entirely possible that Rudolph remains in the Nantahala area. While others doubt anyone's capacity to live alone in the wild for so long, Scott points out that Rudolph enjoys more advantages than prisoners of war—many of whom tend to develop an enduring survivalist mentality. Photograph of Scott (center) with Cynthia Lewis (left) and one of her students, courtesy of the author.*

Arguments that Rudolph remains hidden in the forest include not only the absence of evidence that he has fled, as well as his putative comfort level in the woods where he once trained for survival, but also the sense that if he had died in the woods, his body would have been discovered by now—probably by hunters’ dogs. Bob Scott draws from his reservoir of theories about the case to speculate that although hard evidence of Rudolph’s burglaries has recently dwindled down to nothing, he may have finally learned to slip in and out of the summer cabins that pepper the area and that owners often prefer to leave unlocked to avoid break-ins. Rudolph could be taking only the single can of tuna or beans, or the solitary roll of toilet paper that owners would likely never detect missing, especially if months go by between their visits to these second homes. He may also be pilfering from locals’ gardens in the summer months and stockpiling for colder periods. Andrews mayor Jim Dailey questions how he could make the shift from social to secluded living. “I can’t see the adjustment of changing from everyday life to all of a sudden being isolated away from everybody,” says Dailey, “‘cause, you know, you have to have contact with somebody.” Bob Scott counters Dailey’s musing by comparing Rudolph’s survivalist mentality with that of POWs, who in most cases don’t have nearly as many advantages as Rudolph may have, including the ability to move about and to have regular access to nourishment, however meager. Kenny Cope goes a step farther in wondering whether Rudolph, having diligently prepared for the day of his escape into the woods, isn’t living there now in relative luxury, perhaps in a bunker so well concealed that, as he boasted to George Nordmann, it would escape all notice.

Regarding such matters as how Rudolph may still be surviving in the woods, the locals’ saturation in their native culture and terrain serves them almost as a natural intuition. This keen awareness emerges, for example, in their confidence that Rudolph has not died, as rumored, from the parasite giardia that infests stream water and attacks the human digestive tract. The rumor—based on George Nordmann’s report that in July of 1998 Rudolph had a lean and hungry look—is not even lightly entertained by local law enforcement officers like sheriff Allen Kilpatrick and captain Bob Scott. They know, from years of living in the area, that someone familiar with the streams where Rudolph is supposed to be at large can easily avoid giardia. Another topic that seems to separate the natives from the non-natives is the possibility that Rudolph may have been living in one of the hundreds of virtually concealed caves in the search area.

Much has been made of the reliance by the Southeast Bomb Task Force on the expertise of Darren Free, a specialist who was hired in the fall of 1998 to identify and explore caves where Rudolph might be hiding. The *60 Minutes* segment on the search featured Free’s efforts to canvass whatever caves he could locate, a strategy Free has justified with reference to Rudolph’s statement to George Nordmann about being securely hidden. As much respect as local law enforcement of-

Officers display toward the task force's thorough and deliberate search tactics, they tend to disagree, based on their familiarity with the region, that Rudolph would have ever thought to inhabit a cave. "If there's forty people huntin' and lookin' for you," explains Jack Thompson, "and you're sittin' here [pointing to an imaginary spot on a mountain ridge], you got time to get to the top of the mountain before they get here. And he's got the vantage points." Thompson, who worked with the Forest Service for thirty years, becomes audibly impatient. "I mean, he's not gonna be . . . cave business . . . I don't think he ever went in a cave. There's no exit. And he's not gonna be where there's not an exit. He'd be trapped." Kenny Cope concurs and offers other reasons why Rudolph would avoid lingering in a cave. "If he stayed in a cave for long," says Cope, ". . . he'd die, he'd die, he'd take pneumonia and die—not enough ventilation, too damp, too cool." Cope elaborates on his hunch that Rudolph has fashioned a reasonably "comfortable" habitat for himself. "I think he's got a place built, and I think when that place is found, the normal person's gonna look at it and say, 'Man, I could live there.' I don't think he's roughin' it that much." As to how such a place could fulfill Rudolph's prophecy that no one would ever find him, Cope explains that it "don't have to be that camouflaged to be missed." He compares the difficulty of discerning even a slightly camouflaged bunker with that of making out an illegal marijuana bed. "You'll be standin' here to that door from it and not see it. That's the way it is out there. Until you get out in the woods, it's hard to understand."

The severe winter of 2000–1, which would have been especially difficult for Rudolph to survive, has challenged more than ever local officers' belief that Rudolph is alive, relatively well, and still available for capture. Nevertheless, the belief persists, possibly because of these law enforcers' enormous personal investment in the case: they may *need* to believe that Rudolph can still be caught. Nearly all of them characterize this search as the highlight of their career, whether explicitly or implicitly. Their reasoning for holding on to the hope of seizing Rudolph alive is, in some cases, subject to debate. For instance, to the argument that were Rudolph dead in the woods hunters would have found him, Bob Scott ventures that wild animals could have gotten to his body first, leaving only a belt buckle or shred of clothing that could forever go unnoticed. Scott also portrays the act of establishing a new identity in another part of the country as "easy," lending credence to that possibility. One sanguine letter to the editor of the *Asheville Citizen* jokes that Rudolph "might be in Asheville, disguised as a born-again hippie flower child." Although at this point the matter of what has happened to Eric Rudolph is anybody's guess, some guesses are by necessity more educated than others. The guess—and hope—of most local and federal law enforcement agents is that he is still close by and will be taken at the point when he loses focus and makes a mistake.

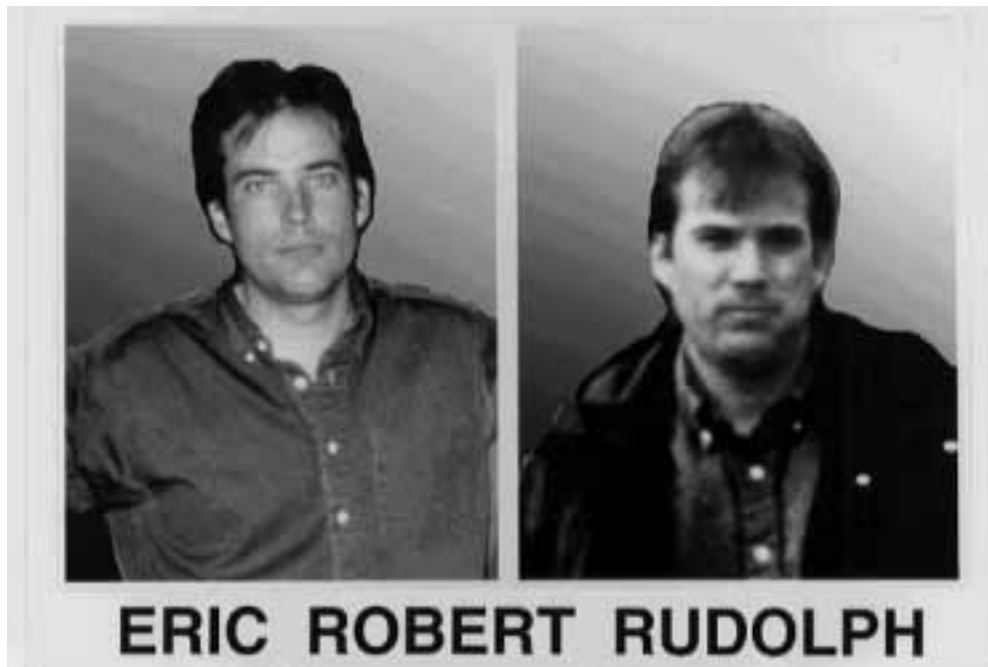


*Regardless of some speculation that Rudolph “might be in Asheville, disguised as a born-again hippie flower child,” many in western North Carolina still think that Rudolph remains in the mountains. If so, his knowledge of the area’s environment, at once beautiful and menacing, will be essential to his survival. The Nantabala River, courtesy of Arvilla Brewer.*

The line between a mistake and a deliberate move in a game, however, tends to blur in this case, in which the man charged may drop clues so as to keep his opponent alert and engaged. If Rudolph is really as “shrewd” as Jack Thompson and others give him credit for, why did he drive all the way to Birmingham to bomb an abortion clinic when he could have chosen one much closer—say, in Asheville? More mysteriously, why did he leave the North Carolina license plates on his truck when they would, as Thompson himself has admitted, “stand out like a sore thumb?” Kenny Cope and others view this oversight as symptomatic of carelessness caused by over-confidence. “He never expected to be seen in Alabama,” says Cope. But the current outcome of Rudolph’s having not changed those plates is a chase that he may have been inviting and in which he is still victor. So caught up in the game with law enforcement is Rudolph, reasons Cope, that he just might emerge once the chase has come to a standstill. “If the game stopped, he’d get bored. In a while, he may surface, just to give somebody a hint.” Depositing George Nordmann’s truck in plain view at the Bob Allison Campground in July 1998 has the appearance of such a hint, although one blatantly teasing law enforcement by pointing them in the wrong direction. Rudolph’s capacity to reinvigorate the game notwithstanding, Cope and others still feel that he will eventually undo himself by tripping up.

Opinions differ as to what Rudolph will do should he eventually come face to face with justice. Jack Thompson doubts that he will consent to being taken alive. “What’s he got to lose now?” says Thompson, who predicts that Rudolph, if given the opportunity, will assault as many law officers as he can in a final display of aggression. Bob Scott agrees, speculating that Rudolph, who has already risked so much to make his statements, will go out in a “blaze of glory.” That Rudolph has booby-trapped his hypothetical hiding place—as well as, perhaps, his person—to accomplish this end has become almost universally assumed. Yet a minority opinion agrees with former director of the SBTf Woody Enderson’s description of Rudolph and his ilk as “those who fear”—in other words, those who choose bombs because they lack the courage for direct confrontation. Some law enforcement officers believe that if cornered Rudolph will merely cower. That possibility raises the question of whether Rudolph would ever disclose his motives if taken into custody, or, like the most defiant of all literary coward-villains, declare with Shakespeare’s defeated Iago, “Demand me nothing; what you know you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word.”

The road across western North Carolina, Route 19–74, is lined in summer with profusions of wild, orange daylilies. The effect is antithetical to that of the for-



*Will he come quietly, or will he go down in a firefight? Either way, the FBI might need to update their photographs for age before they find him—if he’s ever to be found. Courtesy of the FBI Fugitive Publicity Unit.*



bidding tangle stretching out from Wesser Tower as far as the eye can see. Even native North Carolinians may not be prepared for the lovely scenery they encounter as they travel west from cities like Raleigh, Charlotte, or Asheville and across the stream into Andrews's quiet charm, the Great Smokies rising in the distance to meet the colorful, dense clouds. Envisioning a violent criminal on the margins of this setting, let alone the machinery involved in searching for him, seems unthinkable, much as the inhumanity of the crime would appear to have no place amid this natural beauty. Equally difficult to imagine here is a final showdown between Rudolph and law enforcement.

To read the press releases issued by the Department of Justice for the SBTFF during the summer and early fall months of 1998 is to be eerily struck by one recurring theme. "We are not going anywhere before our job is done," says one. "I repeat," reads another, "that we are not going away. We will continue to search until Eric Rudolph is in custody." States yet another, "I would repeat, that we are in this for the long haul." By almost any standard, the long haul has been underway for some time. The FBI and related agencies under the task force wait, poised to take action in the event of a trace of Rudolph's presence. The stakes in this case are high. Not only has the Olympics, a world gathering place, been violated on home turf, but Rudolph is suspected of being one of the most threatening domestic terrorists ever known, in a category with Timothy McVeigh and Theodore Kaczynski. Rudolph epitomizes why Americans have reason to fear that terrorism represents our next domestic crisis. And his apparent lack of a clear motive and a consistent pattern of behavior intensify the threat that Rudolph poses. "We've never faced a domestic terrorist like this in the United States," says Bob Scott. All the more reason for law enforcers to wish that Kenny Cope's prophecy will come true. "When Eric gets caught, it's because he's gonna mess up. He'll get comfortable. And he'll show himself."

#### NOTES

Most of the interviews for this essay were conducted in Macon and Cherokee Counties, North Carolina, during the summer of 2000, including those with Villa Brewer, Kenny Cope, Jim Dailey, Clay Hardin, Tina Jones, Allen Kilpatrick, George Nordmann, Bob Scott, Tom Smith, and Jack Thompson. Angie Bateman, Ruth Grindal, Bunny Johns, and Dwight McCarter all spoke with me by phone during the same summer. Print and television sources for the essay include Michael Kelly, "The Road to Paranoia," *New Yorker*, 19 June 1995; *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2 August 1996; *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 2 February 1997, 3 February 1997, 15 October 1998, 31 January 1999, 19 September 1999, 21 March 2000, 1 July 2000; *Washington Post*, 5 June 1997, 6 May 1998, 15 July 1998, 22 July 1998, 11 August 1998, 27 October 1998, 23 March 1999, 12 July 1999; FBI/ATF news release, 9 June 1997; FBI news release, 18 November 1997; *New York Times*, 30 January 1998, 3 August 1998; *Time* magazine, 23 February 1998; DOJ news releases, July–December 1998; *Outside* magazine, June 1998; *Birmingham News*, 15 July 1998; *Newsweek*, 27 July 1998; *Christian Science*

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