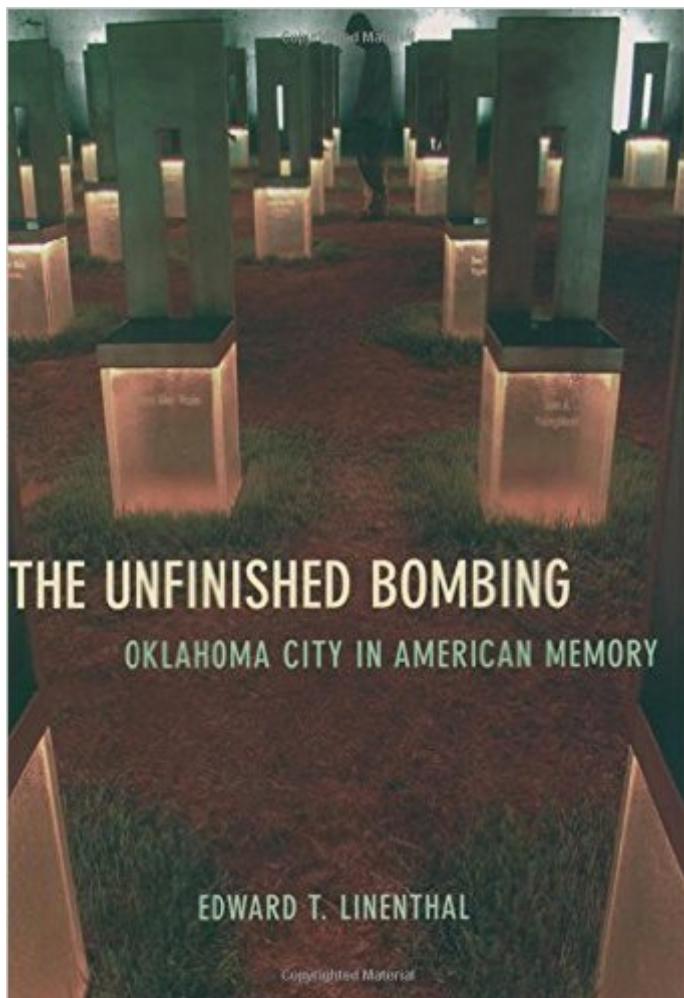


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# The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City In American Memory



## Synopsis

On April 19, 1995 the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City shook the nation, destroying our complacent sense of safety and sending a community into a tailspin of shock, grief, and bewilderment. Almost as difficult as the bombing itself has been the aftermath, its legacy for Oklahoma City and for the nation, and the struggle to recover from this unprecedented attack. In *The Unfinished Bombing*, Edward T. Linenthal explores the many ways Oklahomans and other Americans have tried to grapple with this catastrophe. Working with exclusive access to materials gathered by the Oklahoma City National Memorial Archive and drawing from over 150 personal interviews with family members of those murdered, survivors, rescuers, and many others. Linenthal looks at how the bombing threatened cherished ideas about American innocence, sparked national debate on how to respond to terrorism at home and abroad, and engendered a new "bereaved community" in Oklahoma City itself. Linenthal examines how different stories about the bombing were told through positive narratives of civic renewal and of religious redemption and more negative narratives of toxicity and trauma. He writes about the extraordinary bonds of affection that were created in the wake of the bombing, acts of kindness, empathy, and compassion that existed alongside the toxic legacy of the event. *The Unfinished Bombing* offers a compelling look at both the individual and the larger cultural consequences of one of the most searing events in recent American history.

## Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (May 1, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195161076

ISBN-13: 978-0195161076

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 0.9 x 6.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 starsÂ  See all reviewsÂ (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #753,877 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #182 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Propaganda & Political Psychology #295 inÂ Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Living > Counseling #1658 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Terrorism

## Customer Reviews

'The Unfinished Bombing' provides a glimpse into what happened in Oklahoma City AFTER the bombing, and details the evolution of the National Memorial completed in 2000. In light of what happened on 9/11/2001, this book provides a remarkable insight into how we as a society grieve and memorialize sites of national tragedy. This is not any easy or simple process, and Linenthal does an excellent job in explaining what happened in OKC, and the wide variety of issues that were confronted in developing the memorial. I would recommend this book to anyone considering how America should memorialize the World Trade Center site.

In so many ways this is a fascinating and thoughtful book on one of the most important tragedies in American public life in the last decade of the twentieth century. No area of historical study in the last twenty years has been more important than the nature of memory and "The Unfinished Bombing" is an attempt to understand how Americans have recalled the April 19, 1995, instance of domestic terrorism that took place in Oklahoma City. On that day Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols conspired to explode a truck bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building killing 168 people, injuring many more, and opening a wound on the national landscape about the nature of modern American democracy. It is an exceptional study of how stories about the past become a master narrative, and what lessons they teach to those affected. This memory is constructed gradually over time as people reflect on the meaning of what has transpired, and much of what emerges is not so much a fable or falsehood as it is a kind of poetry about events and situations that have great significance for the people involved. The memories over time become more significant than the cold, hard facts of the past, insofar as they are recoverable at all, and become the essential truths of the past for the members of a cultural group who hold them, enact them, or perceive them. This book helps to pull those ideas together into a coherent discussion concerning the 1995 bombing. Edward T. Linenthal, now at Indiana University where he edits the "Journal of American History," draws on extensive field work in Oklahoma City to construct this analysis of public memory and memorialization. Most interesting to me was how three preferred narratives emerged from the bombing, all rooted in personal understandings of what took place. The first was a progressive story of how the tragedy was overcome. It was about the heroism of the rescue workers, the support of citizens throughout the nation, and the recovery of Oklahoma City through urban renewal, commemoration, and a demonstration of character. This is very much, as Linenthal wrote, a story of "yes, it was horrendous but..." (p. 41) before telling all of the good that emerged from the experience. A second narrative, Linenthal believes, is one of redemption, "A crisis of meaning, as people struggled to locate it in an ongoing religious narrative" (p. 53). In this narrative, the pain and

suffering of those who died, as well as those who survived, served as a sacrament, in the words of one survivor, Susan Urbach, "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace" (p. 70). Finally, Linenthal unpacks what he calls a toxic narrative, one filled with loss, mourning, pain, and suffering. Sometimes it manifested itself in anger and agony, sometimes in fear and a desire for retribution, sometimes in the broken lives those who could not deal with the tragedy. It is this last narrative that Linenthal spends the most time with, writing at length about what he calls a "wounded community." He describes in detail the process whereby members of the families of those at the Murrah building waited to hear if their loved ones had been rescued, or if bodies had been recovered, and finally how they commemorated those lost. Not only that, the toll on those working on the rescue efforts was intense. The best example, well told in "The Unfinished Bombing," is of Chris Fields, the fireman who became a celebrity when his picture was taken bringing the body of a one-year-old girl (Baylee Almon) out of the rubble, and the mother of the child, Aren Almon-Kok, who also became a celebrity. Neither had any desire for such a spotlight to be shined on their lives, but modern media omnivorous in its appetite for visuality turned them into public figures. The fact that they handled this scrutiny, dare I say intrusion, into their private lives with grace during a time of trauma says much about the quiet dignity of many of those who had to deal with this act of homegrown terrorism. Linenthal, tells in this episode the interweaving of the toxic, redemptive, and progressive narratives in the lives of those at the Murrah building on the morning of April 19th. Toward the end of this account Linenthal discusses the process of commemoration of this terrorist act. Here he is concerned mostly with the public memory offered for all to see. He notes that in such instances considerable debate is necessary to determine what exactly "is being remembered, who is being remembered, and the forms through which remembrance is expressed" (p. 195). Hierarchies of those who suffered found expression in the commemoration, discussions of whether or not to mention the terrorists who perpetrated the bombing also took place. And then, of course, there was the difficult process of deciding on the design to be employed in the memorial. What resulted was akin to a public park, and questions about its serene nature overcoming the horror of the event abounded. In the end, through a convoluted process of discourse involving huge numbers of people most agreed that this memorial was a fitting tribute to those killed, as well as those injured both physically and emotionally, in this terrorist attack. Its incorporation into the National Park Service ensured that it became a major part of the official memory of the United States. There is much to praise in this important book, and little to criticize. I recommend it as a fine case study of how we remember tragic events in the United States.

If you're looking for an introduction to the Oklahoma City Bombing, this isn't the book you want. The author is primarily concerned with the development of memorialization, and how the community processed an infamous tragedy. The information on the actual bombing (perpetrators, procedure, etc.) is minimal, and the author's approach is distinctly academic. The academic tone of the book is nicely balanced with personal anecdotes of survivors and family members, saving the book from being overly dry. Personally, I enjoyed the unique focus of the text, and believe that it would be useful for interpreting any memorial process.

I mean, I'm not sure the feedback to be left in the process of purchasing a textbook. It arrived later than I expected, but the book itself has no flaws to speak of. It was at a reasonable price and I suppose that's all that can be said for a textbook purchase. Heyo.

The 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City shook the nation and produced a modest flurry of books. This late addition fills in a few blanks that may interest specialists. A life of Timothy McVeigh might enjoy wide appeal, and terrorist plots have a gruesome fascination, but readers won't find them here. Edward Linenthal, Professor of Religion and American Culture at the University of Wisconsin spends little time on the bombers and the explosion. He has written a history of ideas, an academic field in which the books may outnumber the readers. In works of this genre, the author first asks a question. Thus, was the bombing a senseless atrocity? Or was it an act one would expect in the U.S., a culture that glamorizes violence? Having asked a question, the author doesn't answer it. He collects everyone else's answer, assembling page after page of quotes from editorials, talk shows, pundits, politicians, clergymen, and academics. After recording these thoughts, the author draws no conclusions. The chapter ends. Another chapter introduces another question. Was God or Satan responsible for the catastrophe? Oklahomans are a conservative people, and there is no shortage of feeling that a federal government that keeps the Bible out of schools bears much responsibility. Ironically, clergymen are far more restrained than laymen in laying blame. Mostly, clergymen admit they can't explain it. For years after the blast, the city argued vehemently over a proper memorial for the victims. The author considers this such an important controversy that he devotes half the book to it. With the memorial complete, I doubt if many residents of Oklahoma City want to read about the pros and cons of the design. It has even less appeal to anyone else.

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