

Many Doubt FBI Procedures But Not the McVeigh Verdict

The FBI's popularity has dropped sharply in the face of the Timothy McVeigh documents snafu, to its lowest in nearly 20 years. But most Americans think the failure to deliver investigative reports wasn't deliberate, and say his sentence should stand.

Fifty-two percent say the incident reveals "deeper problems" at the FBI. Its favorability rating is 29 points below its peak after McVeigh's arrest six years ago. And while most people do think the bureau can do its job, just 28 percent are "very" confident of that.

Fifty-four percent think the FBI failed to deliver investigative documents to McVeigh's lawyers by accident, not on purpose – a majority, but hardly a rousing endorsement of the bureau's integrity. Thirty-two percent think it withheld the documents on purpose; 14 percent are withholding judgment.

Favorable opinion of the FBI	
5/01	53%
6/99*	71
8/95*	64
5/95	82

*PSRA polls. See full trend below.

Nonetheless, two-thirds or more say the issue is not serious enough to give McVeigh a new trial or a new sentencing hearing. And 75 percent favor his execution, same as it was in polls before the controversy arose.

FBI document snafu:			
Accident	54%	Isolated incident	38%
Intentional	32	Sign of deeper problems	52

FBI – Views of the FBI have fluctuated with its recent successes and problems. It was steady around 75 percent favorable in the 1980s, and peaked at 82 percent just after McVeigh's arrest in spring 1995. That fell to 64 percent three months later, during congressional hearings into the 1993 Waco standoff.

The bureau's popularity regained ground in a 1999 poll, only to fall again now. The McVeigh issue comes three months after the arrest of a senior bureau official, Robert Hanssen, on espionage charges.

The criticism is tempered; 82 percent of Americans do express confidence in the bureau's ability to do its job. But as noted, 54 percent are "somewhat confident" of that, while only 28 percent are "very" confident.

There is some political component to views of the bureau. Its favorability rating declines from 62 percent among Republicans to 54 percent of Democrats and 47 percent of independents. Unfavorable views of the agency also spike among older Americans.

McVEIGH – McVeigh wins little sympathy: Seventy-five percent of Americans support his execution, which is more than the 63 percent who supported the death penalty in general in a recent ABC News/Washington Post poll. That comports with the nature of McVeigh's crime, which he's admitted in interviews. He killed 168 people.

And while 32 percent think the FBI withheld the documents on purpose, fewer, 21 percent, think it's serious enough to give McVeigh a new trial. Hardly more, 26 percent, say that apart from the verdict he should get a new sentencing hearing.

	New trial	New sentencing hearing
Favor	21%	26%
Oppose	72	66

Even among those who think the FBI withheld the documents on purpose, 73 percent favor McVeigh's execution. And even among those who think he should get a new trial or a new sentencing hearing, most still say McVeigh should be put to death.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone May 16-20, 2001, among a random national sample of 1,027 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results (*=less than 0.5 percent):

1. As you may know, Timothy McVeigh has been sentenced to death for the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Do you support or oppose the death penalty for McVeigh?

	Support	Oppose	No opinion
5/20/01	75	17	8

2. Do you have a favorable or unfavorable impression of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the FBI?

	Favorable	Unfavorable	No opinion
5/20/01	53	35	12
6/13/99*	71	20	9
10/31/97	67	25	8
5/18/97	60	28	12
8/20/95	64	28	8
5/14/95	82	9	9
8/29/87**	78	17	5
8/23/86	75	17	8
8/24/85	72	20	8
8/18/84	77	19	5
8/20/83	75	19	6

*6/99 through 8/95 by PSRA; "...very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable?" Results netted.

**8/87 and previous by Roper; "...highly favorable, or moderately favorable, or not too favorable, or rather unfavorable?" Results netted.

3. Overall, how confident are you in the FBI's ability to do its job - very confident, somewhat confident, not too confident, or not confident at all?

	-----Confident-----			-----Not Confident-----			No
	Net	Very	Somewhat	Net	Not too	Not at all	opin.
5/20/01	82	28	54	16	10	6	2

4. McVeigh's execution has been delayed because the FBI failed to give his defense lawyers investigative records they should have received. Do you think the FBI failed to deliver these records accidentally, or on purpose?

	Accidentally	On purpose	No opinion
5/20/01	54	32	14

5. Do you think this problem is or is not serious enough to throw out McVeigh's conviction and give him a new trial?

	Is serious enough	Is not serious enough	No opinion
5/20/01	21	72	8

6. Apart from the conviction, do you think this problem is, or is not serious enough to throw out McVeigh's death sentence and give him a new sentencing trial, at which he could either receive a new death sentence or a life term?

	Is serious enough	Is not serious enough	No opinion
5/20/01	26	66	8

7. Do you think the FBI's handling of these McVeigh documents is an isolated incident, or a sign of deeper problems at the FBI?

	Isolated incident	Sign of deeper problems	No opinion
5/20/01	38	52	10

END