

Boom with no view

Police say the Rev. Fred Phelps was not the intended target of a recent bombing at his Kansas compound

by Lisa Marie Neff

Days after an explosion rocked a home at the Phelps compound in west Topeka, Kan., police discounted the idea that the bomb was targeted at the Rev. Fred Phelps Sr., his church or his family.

But Phelps—notorious here and across the country for his pickets against gay men, lesbians and people living with AIDS—continues to say the bomb was a threat against him and his work through the Westboro Baptist Church.

The explosion occurred at about 11:30 pm on Aug. 20. A plastics bomb exploded between a stockade fence and a van parked in the driveway of the home of Shirley Phelps-Roper, the pastor's daughter. While no injuries were reported, the van and fence were damaged.

Police said they believe the explosion was not targeted at Phelps because they confirmed a second explosion in west Topeka that night and received reports of a third.

Before police discounted Phelps' theory and claim that he was the victim of a "pro-homosexual" attack, Phelps speculated that local law enforcement would conclude that he was not the intended target. He said Topeka police, fire officials and prosecutors are "pro-homosexual" and the local media is "pro-homosexual" and they would fail to fully investigate the incident.

In a statement to Topeka Police Chief Gerald Beavers, Phelps said, "Crimes committed against us apparently go uninvestigated while your corrupt officers drive around with anti-Phelps signs on their cars and plot the filing of lying reports exonerating criminals and implicating innocent church members."

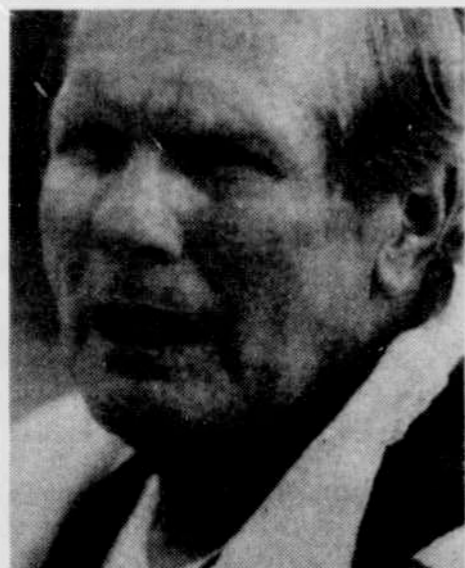
On Aug. 22, Phelps called on the U.S. Justice Department to investigate the explosion. At press time, the Justice Department had not responded to Phelps' request.

Phelps also offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction in the incident.

Some Topeka residents said they believe Phelps was the target of the explosion. Others believe the explosion was the result of youth pranks, and some think that Phelps or a follower set off the bomb. Nearly all residents interviewed by this reporter said Phelps had too many enemies for him to blame a single person or group for the incident.

Although Phelps calls his work against lesbians and gay men a crusade, others have described his pickets as cruel and his words as hateful and bigoted.

The recent "Phelps trials," a series of seven proceedings against Phelps and several of his relatives and church members for actions at homophobic demonstrations last winter, resulted in an exorbitant bill for taxpayers, the possibility of a lawsuit filed by Phelps, and only two convictions—Phelps and his son Benjamin C. Phelps.



Fred Phelps

Phelps was acquitted on the charges of misdemeanor assault and battery but convicted on two disorderly conduct charges. Several of the trials ended with acquittals and others with deadlocked juries.

Responding to the pastor's claim that the explosion was set by a "pro-homosexual," National Gay and Lesbian Task Force spokeswoman Robin Kane said Phelps should be challenged for "accusing without reason or evidence."

Kane also said Phelps—with his cruel demonstrations at the funerals of people who have died of AIDS-related complications and protests at public speaker's forums and gay and lesbian events—creates an atmosphere of violence. "He should be very careful in saying who caused this act," Kane said. "He's making wild speculations."

Strange bedfellows II: Colin Powell

Colin Powell, the retired general and possible presidential candidate, has been blasted for wanting "to deny gays the same equal rights that enabled him to succeed."

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato (R-N.Y.) argued that Powell was applying a double standard in his support of the ban on lesbians and gay men openly serving in the military. The comment came in an interview with the conservative newspaper *The Washington Times*.

"He was a young black second lieutenant who had not attended West Point and yet rose through the ranks to become head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," D'Amato said. "I thought he would have had a certain sensitivity and say, 'We judge people on the basis of their ability.'"

This follows closely on the heels of D'Amato's book *Power, Pasta, and Politics: The World According to Senator Al D'Amato*, where he wrote: "I wonder whether Colin Powell has either



Colin Powell

the courage or the convictions needed to lead the country."

Some observers have suggested the senator's comments are motivated by his support of Sen. Robert Dole's quest for the Republican presidential nomination and a desire to undercut any possible competitor.

However, D'Amato's remarks were consistent with what he has said earlier. The senator surprised and dismayed many conservatives with his strong comments opposing the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military, which he made in February 1993, in the opening weeks of that debate.

Bob Roehr

Karen Sweigert, M.D.

Physician and Surgeon
Obstetrics and Gynecology

Metropolitan Clinic
1130 N.W. 22nd, Suite 520
Portland, Oregon 97210
229-7538

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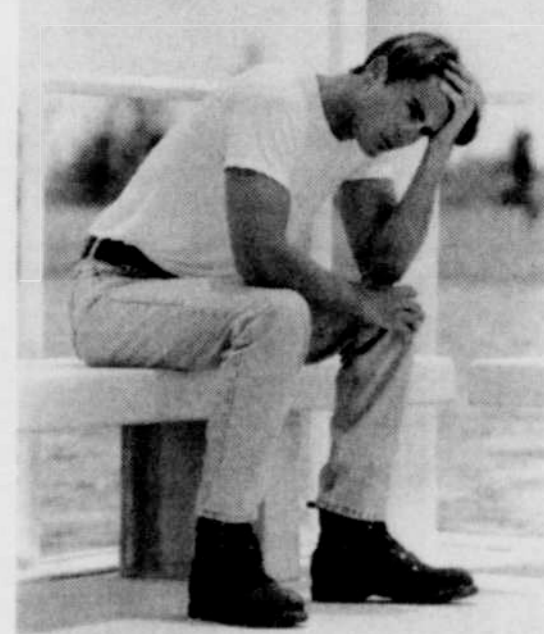
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