

**Case 29: Springfield**

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June 4, 2011

Michael Finton, a part-time fry cook in Decatur, Illinois, had converted to Islam in prison when serving a sentence for aggravated robbery. Largely self-motivated and self-taught, he became increasingly upset what he saw as the American wars against his adopted religion in Iraq and Afghanistan. Placed on a watch list by the FBI for possession of radical literature, for strident public spoutings that mostly alienated fellow Muslims, and for a somewhat mysterious trip to Saudi Arabia, Finton began to be tagged with a couple of FBI informants beginning in 2007. In the ensuing months the group concocted a scheme to set off a truck bomb outside a federal courthouse in nearby Springfield. Finton took the lead in the planning and the FBI in supplying the supposed bomb. To help insulate the investigation from charges of entrapment, the informants often told Finton he was free to back out at any time, an approach also applied in later cases as well as in the Dallas skyscraper case that was going on at the same time (Case 30).

Finton subscribed to a vague and entirely unexamined notion that his explosion would somehow be the “first domino,” encouraging other Muslims to join the battle. However, the experience cannot have been terribly inspiring because the bomb was inert and Finton was arrested when he tried to detonate it from a distance with a cell phone in September 2009, only one day before the same process was played out with the Dallas aspirant.

Ronald Lieberman sees the gullible red-haired Finton, who talked a lot, but had no skills, training, money, or weapons, as something of a “born loser,” and who, without the enablers supplied and paid for by the FBI, might never have managed to get around to attacking America.

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### 1. Overview

On September 23, 2009 in Springfield, Illinois, Michael Finton was arrested and charged with attempted murder of a federal officer and attempted use a weapon of mass destruction. Finton is accused of attempting to destroy the Paul Findley Federal Building and Courthouse with a truck bomb. However, the “truck bomb” was supplied by an undercover FBI agent and was full of inactive materials, not explosives as Finton had been led to believe. He was taken into custody immediately after he attempted to explode the bomb with a cellular phone. The arrest occurred after months of work by the FBI through an undercover agent; they believed him to be a terrorist threat and wanted to see that threat manifest itself in a situation they could control. On October 7, 2009 Finton was indicted in the Central District Court of Illinois, with his trial slated to begin in March 2011.

Finton does not appear to have been entrapped, but it seems he would not have done much of anything without the FBI’s involvement: he was not tricked into doing anything, but he might well have never done anything on his own either.

### 2. Nature of the adversary

Finton is a red-headed Caucasian-American citizen born in 1980 who lived in Decatur, Illinois, at the time of his arrest. His hometown is Visalia, California, according to his MySpace page and he attended high school in Warren, Michigan, but was expelled for fighting a teacher.<sup>1</sup> No evidence exists that Finton ever finished high school or received his GED. On February 3, 1999, according to the court record, he held up a convenience store in Olney, Illinois, in the process threatening the female clerk with a “dangerous weapon or firearm” and causing her “serious bodily harm,” ultimately taking \$323 in cash and eight cartons of cigarettes.<sup>2</sup> He was convicted of aggravated assault and aggravated robbery and received a sentence of ten years. Sometime between 1999 and 2005, while serving time in prison for his conviction, Finton converted to Islam. He moved to Decatur after his release to attend the local mosque, but this led to his arrest on August 15, 2007, because he had failed to report his move to his parole officer in a timely manner.<sup>3,4</sup>

On his MySpace page in January 2007, Finton presents a very negative self-image: “Everybody liked me, yet I hated myself. People thought I was smart,

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<sup>1</sup> “Michael Finton,” *Wikipedia*. Accessed November 30, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> “Finton,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>3</sup> Dirk Johnson, “Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot ‘Didn’t Like America Very Much’,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Rushton, “Man Accused in Bombing Plot Known for Strong Stance on Islam,” *Pjstar.com*. September 24, 2007.

and reasonably good-looking, but to me, I was a moron, and a freak.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to say that he studied numerous religions including “Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Moorish Science Temple (a religion founded in America about a century ago), House of Yaweh (a religion based in Texas), even Aztec philosophy,” until he finally found solace in Islam while in prison.<sup>6</sup> These comments allow a glimpse into Finton’s psyche. He never had much success in life, in his career, with women, with anything, but here was something he could finally be successful in and get behind: radical Islam. Finton was vulnerable to being drawn into the terrorist cause. It seems he finally wanted to become important, to be known, and committing a terrorist act or somehow supporting the radical Muslim cause gave him an opportunity to do so.

During his August 2007 arrest, law enforcement discovered numerous letters and notebooks containing radical Muslim thoughts, including correspondence with John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban.” When Finton returned to the police station to collect his belongings, the police interviewed him (Finton cooperated voluntarily), and learned more of his radical Islamic beliefs including that he idolized Lindh. With this in mind, the FBI placed him on the terrorist watch list.<sup>7</sup>

After that string of events, Finton continued to live in Decatur and work part-time as a fry cook for the local Seals Fish & Chicken. The job supported only a meager existence and, due to his criminal record and lack of education, there was little chance he could attain a better job.

Finton’s neighbors commented on how he acted during the time he spent in Decatur. A younger neighbor, Brandon Jackson (aged 19), noted that Finton looked out for him and often invited him over for pizza and to watch soccer. He very much acted like a mentor towards Jackson, especially went it came to religion, teaching him some of the tenets of Islam in an attempt to “keep him on the right track.” Another neighbor, Vivian Laster, felt similarly, saying that she could never see Finton committing such an act.<sup>8</sup>

However, Finton’s fellow workers noted that he “didn’t like America very much” and believed that America was “at war with Islam.”<sup>9</sup> He did not hate Americans, but was frustrated with what the government had turned them into. His enemy was not the average American, but the government and those who worked for it were an entirely different story: any means necessary could be used to take it down. One could say that Finton was fairly ideological, in the sense that the government could simply be blamed for everything. In reality, although the government may be part of the so-called “war with Islam,” it is unlikely it is alone to blame. Finton’s failure to realize this gives a glimpse into his ideological thinking. Since Finton did blame the government for the “war with Islam,” he became politically tuned-in, often commenting on recent events in American

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<sup>5</sup> Rushton, “Man Accused.”

<sup>6</sup> Rushton, “Man Accused.”

<sup>7</sup> United States of America v. Michael C. Finton (a/k/a “Talib Islam”). 2. Central District Court of Illinois, September 24, 2009, Nefafoundation.org.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, “Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot.”

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, “Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot.”

foreign policy and terrorist attacks. He kept up with current events, and did not simply live in his own radical bubble.<sup>10</sup>

A fellow member of the Muslim community spoke of how excited Finton was about his new faith, but how it was more of an annoyance than anything.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Finton practiced a fairly militant form of Islam, common among prison converts; he even mentioned to the confidential informant that the local Muslims were much more relaxed than the Muslims he had known in prison,<sup>12</sup> suggesting that Finton was religiously fanatical and somewhat socially marginalized by the one group he wanted to be part of the most. Finton recognized his social isolation in Decatur: he comments in an interview with radio host Greg Bishop that “I’m not from here in Southern Illinois. People are different, that’s not anything bad, they’re just different. When I went to Saudi Arabia I fit in.”<sup>13</sup>

The visit to Saudi Arabia occurred in March 2008 when he received \$1375 from a man known only as “Asala Hussain Abiba” in Saudi Arabia, and he then used these funds to purchase a month-long trip there from a local travel agency.<sup>14</sup> Finton told the confidential informant that “Abiba” was a Shaykh in Saudi Arabia who wanted him to marry his daughter.<sup>15</sup> However, whether or not any further investigation of this claim by the government occurred is unknown. Although Finton did in fact travel to Saudi Arabia and claimed in an e-mail to U.S. Representative Phil Hare he was, “making a pilgrimage to Mecca,” not much is known. Jordanian officials were warned by the FBI of Finton’s watch list status, and they then searched his bags while he was traveling from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.<sup>16</sup> The FBI assumed that this trip was a stepping-stone to Finton finally acting out his beliefs, and it kept an even closer eye on him when he returned to the U.S. The possibility that a true Saudi Arabian Shaykh would want his daughter to marry a red-headed American jailbird Muslim-convert seems highly unlikely, meaning Finton may have lied about his trip to cover up its true purpose. Finton steadfastly claims in an interview with radio host Greg Bishop that he made contact with the Shaykh through a Muslim matrimonial website and the entire trip was innocent, but this has not been confirmed.<sup>17</sup>

Much of Finton’s inspiration, motivation, and influence was centered on his faith. Finton himself told the authorities after his 2007 parole-violation arrest that John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban,” and Anwar Al-Awlaki, radical American-born imam considered to be a senior level recruiter for al-Qaeda, were large influences on his thinking. He sought to emulate Lindh, even going as far to say he idolized him.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> United States v. Finton, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, “Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot.”

<sup>12</sup> United States v. Finton, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Greg Bishop, “A Suspected Terrorist Speaks,” Theintelhub.com, September 25, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> United States v. Finton, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Rushton, “Man Accused.”

<sup>16</sup> Rushton, “Man Accused.”

<sup>17</sup> Bishop, “A Suspected Terrorist.”

<sup>18</sup> United States v. Finton, 2.

Linda Boles, a journalism professor Finton worked with when he submitted articles to the *Communicatur*, a student newspaper at Richland Community College in Decatur, said that Finton, like many people freshly converted to Islam, was on the radical side.<sup>19</sup> But most, over time, move back to the center and fit in with the general Muslim population. Finton, however, did not follow this model and continued to radicalize, inspired by the actions and writings of Lindh, Al-Awlaki, and other terrorists across the world.

The “attacks” by America on Islam frustrated and angered him. The frustration stemmed from what he saw as the way Americans followed what the politicians said in a sheep-like fashion and did not speak out. It came as well from his own inability to act out in a way he felt was relevant enough to show his strong dedication.<sup>20</sup> The anger originated from Finton believing that America was “at war with Islam,” his own religion and perhaps the thing he cherished most. In his mind, America was attacking his very way of life.

Finton was not recruited to terrorism by anyone. The undercover agents facilitated the process, but Finton’s decision to become a terrorist was made entirely on his own. On his MySpace page, Finton’s created his own nickname, “Talib Islam,” Arabic for “student of Islam,” a name by which he would become infamous.<sup>21</sup> He decided to join the terrorist movement because of his desire to stand up for his religion, because of an apparent desire for personal glory, and because of a desire to serve justice. It is unlikely he did it in hopes of gaining friendship. He did refer to other terrorists as “brothers” and the undercover agent as “the brother,” but this is less friendship than it is being a part of something bigger than him.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that Finton was mentally stable while making all these decisions. He himself told Bishop in their interview, “I’m not crazy. I’m not going to play crazy,” in reference to the psychological evaluation he will undergo as part of his trial.

To be blunt, Michael Finton was a radical Muslim, but also a born loser. He had no skills whatsoever, not even a high school education. Granted he was a prolific reader of radical Islamic material and followed the news, but at the end of the day he lived by himself in a simple apartment and worked as a fry-cook. He spent much of his time on the computer spouting off his ideas, trying to make himself seem important, when in fact he was just another insignificant member of the world.

### 3. Motivation

Finton was motivated by the idea that something must be done to stop America’s war on Islam that was occurring overseas. This simple principle, at least in his mind, motivated all he wanted to do; something must be done. When this idea is broken down, however, one sees that the principle is only the exterior

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<sup>19</sup> Rushton, “Man Accused.”

<sup>20</sup> United States v. Finton, 7.

<sup>21</sup> “IL Federal Building Targeted by Muslim Convert,” Homelandsecurityus.com, Northeast Intelligence Network, Sept 24, 2009. Web.

<sup>22</sup> United States v. Finton, 6.

fruition of his motivation made up of more components, justice, glory and religion.

Finton views America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as unjust. He is motivated by the idea that justice must be brought upon America for the wrongs it has committed in its attempt to "fight" Islam. Islam saved Finton from himself. Therefore, the one thing that Finton held most dear, his new religion, was in his mind under attack by the American government. Taken out of context, one could even consider such motivation noble, the desire to simply protect what one cares about most.

Religion itself played a role in Finton's motivation. Like many Muslim terrorists, he believed the path of the jihadist warrior, the terrorist, is the path to heaven. If he fought Islam's fight he would be granted a berth in heaven, despite any of his previous sins before he found the faith. Finton was therefore on the radical side of Islam, but this could be seen as a way to assuage his own hesitation with killing. He definitely wanted to protect his religion, but was unsure whether killing people would be acceptable; adopting this radical doctrine allowed him eliminate this from his thoughts.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4. Goals**

The ultimate goal of Michael Finton's terrorism was to cause a string of attacks that would force the government to withdraw troops from the Middle East in order to maintain peace. Finton often conflated this goal with the idea that America was at war with Islam in the Middle East and therefore needed to be taken down altogether, although he felt that bringing troops home would create a more martial law situation that would strengthen the government's hold, not weaken it.<sup>24</sup> But, Finton also argues that a great string of attacks would awaken the public conscience to the injustice done by their government. Like most terrorists, Finton did not have a grand scheme or definitive goals. Any goals he did have were rather fluid and not well thought out or backed by facts.

He often spoke of, and hoped to be, the "first domino" with his attack.<sup>25</sup> The attack in Springfield would hopefully be followed by further attacks from Muslims that would ultimately lead to the fall of the government.

#### **5. Plans for violence**

Finton's original plan for violence was to fly to the Middle East and fight on the side of the terrorists/insurgents. However, he had no training whatsoever in warfare and was not in the best physical shape either. He slowly realized these facts and came to the conclusion that if he wanted to get involved in the fight, it would have to be here in America, not over there.

All the information known on Finton's case comes from the criminal complaint filed in the U.S. District Court.<sup>26</sup> The plan for violence Michael Finton had (at least the one he was arrested for) was to blow up the Paul Findley Federal

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<sup>23</sup> United States v. Finton, 12.

<sup>24</sup> United States v. Finton, 16.

<sup>25</sup> United States v. Finton, 21.

<sup>26</sup> United States v. Finton, 1.

Building and Courthouse in Springfield, Illinois, causing physical damage and killing federal employees.

The general plan was to park a truck loaded with explosives in front of the building and detonate it from a remote location.<sup>27</sup> The explosion would cause damage to the Findley Building and, he hoped, to the office of Representative Aaron Schock as well. This plan was put into motion. However Finton did not realize this plan was crucially facilitated by an FBI undercover agent who he believed to be an al-Qaeda agent.<sup>28</sup>

## **6. Role of informants**

For most of his life Finton did not seem very determined to make a difference, at least not until he made contact with the undercover agent. This fact may be further developed by the observation that Finton preferred to not be a suicide bomber, which might be taken to show a lack of determination to make a difference.<sup>29</sup>

At any rate, there were two informants in this case: a confidential civilian informant and an undercover FBI agent. Both were critical.

The informant is identified in the criminal complaint filed in the U.S. District Court, and this is the only source of information on him. He is a fellow Muslim who was instructed by FBI agents to make casual acquaintance with Finton and report back to them. The FBI initiated this undertaking after it began to believe Finton was a terrorist threat, especially in the context of his trip to Saudi Arabia and after the further discovery of radical Islamist documents in his possession. The informant, like Finton, converted to Islam while in prison and agreed to work with the FBI in hopes of receiving monetary compensation (such compensation is his only known motivation). There is unconfirmed information that the informant was involved in illegal drug distribution during the investigation, which would suspend any monetary payments. Except for the first few conversations between him and Finton, all meetings were covertly recorded.<sup>30</sup>

At the start, the informant simply approached Finton as a like-minded individual when it came to Islam and America's attacks against it. He was "taking the temperature" of Finton's attitude towards America and allowing the FBI to get a glimpse into what he was capable of and what he was considering doing. Since the first conversations between him and Finton were not recorded, the informant's word has to be taken that he was not entrapping Finton at the start.<sup>31</sup> The informant was seeking monetary compensation, giving him strong motivation to attempt to entrap Finton.

At any rate, for over a year Finton expressed (or vented) his beliefs to the informant about Islam and terrorist activities and most importantly how he wanted to become involved. The informant noted that Finton strongly desired to acquire military training, especially the kind seen in the attacks on Mumbai, India, in late

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<sup>27</sup> United States v. Finton, 1.

<sup>28</sup> United States v. Finton, 9.

<sup>29</sup> United States v. Finton, 10.

<sup>30</sup> United States v. Finton, 4.

<sup>31</sup> United States v. Finton, 6.

2008. By early January 2009, Finton's language had changed from simple idealism and talking to being on the verge of taking action. He told the informant that he wanted to travel to Israel and fight for the Palestinians and secure his place in Jannah (Paradise) by becoming a mujahidin (jihadist fighter).<sup>32</sup>

When the informant asked Finton if he wanted to take his beliefs to the next level, Finton replied in the affirmative, and was put in contact with an undercover FBI agent posing as a low-ranking al-Qaeda member.<sup>33</sup> Due to the secrecy of undercover work, little is known about the agent, not even the agent's sex or ethnicity. All the conversations and contacts the agent had with Finton were recorded.

The new agent met with Finton multiple times. The first few visits were to determine Finton's intentions and to test his dedication to the cause. He had Finton receive mail "from the Middle East" and forward it to an al-Qaeda contact in the U.S. so that it would not look like the contact received the mail from the Middle East. Finton quickly completed the task. Next, the agent had Finton purchase different electronic components to be forwarded to others involved in terrorism. Again, Finton completed the task, often seeming excited by the success he had and how many components he was able to acquire.<sup>34</sup> At this point the agent told Finton he had proven himself, but he could still back out if he wanted to; nothing would be held against him. However, Finton was adamant he was dedicated and wanted to continue working with al-Qaeda.

Throughout, Finton and the agent discussed what his eventual real attack would be. Finton made it clear he was very apprehensive when it came to attacking civilians, but if the target was military or political he was "100% in."<sup>35</sup> Targets such as government buildings, banks, and police stations were all acceptable to Finton. When asked about possibly walking into a building and planting a backpack full of explosives, Finton showed no hesitation and even had recommendations for different places to put it where it wouldn't be seen. This idea suited him, as he preferred not to be a suicide bomber, but if that were what it took for him to support the cause and gain entrance to heaven, he would do it. Finton wanted his attack to seriously hurt the government and to wake it up to the wrongs of its "war against Islam." It would realize the error of its ways or would be destroyed: either result was satisfactory. Hence, targets would be chosen in a manner that would bring about these results.

On July 29, 2009 Finton and the agent met in a hotel in Springfield. The agent asked about attacking a police station, but Finton suggested an easier alternative target: the Paul Findley Courthouse in Springfield. He further suggested that they use a truck bomb parked in front for a more effective attack, not just a small backpack bomb. The two walked down to the Courthouse the same day to take a look at the building and further discuss tactics.<sup>36</sup> Finton walked into the building alone to get an even better look, but was told by the

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<sup>32</sup> United States v. Finton, 7.

<sup>33</sup> United States v. Finton, 9.

<sup>34</sup> United States v. Finton, 13, 18.

<sup>35</sup> United States v. Finton, 12.

<sup>36</sup> United States v. Finton, 18.



guard on duty the building was not open to the general public. The ideal plan, Finton decided, was to park a truck bomb in front of the building, detonate it, and then use a second bomb to harm responders to the first explosion. Finton told the contact, under his own volition, that the plan was entirely his idea.

After further meetings with the agent, the plan was finalized, with much of the input coming from Finton himself, not the agent. On September 23, 2009, the agent dropped Finton off at the truck, which was supposedly loaded with a ton of explosives. Finton then drove it to the federal building, parked it in front, got into the car of the agent (with the agent driving), and the two drove away. After two blocks Finton used his cell phone to “detonate” the bomb. The truck, of course, was full of inactive materials, and at this point, the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) and local law enforcement took Finton into custody.<sup>37</sup>

The entire plan and all the resources that went into it was made possible by the FBI, and Finton was completely fooled. Finton had no practical training in explosives, military exercises, or firearms, and there is no evidence he even owned a gun. With such a serious lack of experience, it is unlikely Finton would have ever been successful without knowledgeable help from someone else.

The agent’s specific role within the case was to further assess Finton’s intention and assist in creating a situation that Finton could carry out his “attack” in a way the FBI could control.<sup>38</sup> He obviously played a critical role in the case: without him, there would have never been any attack, at least in the form that was seen. It is entirely possible that Finton never would have attacked anything at all, had it not been for the agent’s involvement.

Most of the recorded conversations have Finton leading the discussion while the agent only comments on what Finton has already said. When it came to choosing an actual target, it was Finton who suggested the courthouse, not the agent, and it was Finton who suggested using a truck bomb, not the agent. In essence, the entire plan was Finton’s idea, something he even tells the confidential informant.<sup>39</sup> The agent (and the confidential informant) asked Finton on numerous occasions if he is positive this is what he wants to do, and the agent reminds Finton just as often that he can back out at any time and still be considered a “brother of the cause.”<sup>40</sup>

All of this information comes from the criminal complaint filed by the U.S. But in an interview in 2010 with radio host Greg Bishop, Finton tells a very different story. Finton claims to have known the operation was a set-up from the very beginning, that he was only doing what he was told, that none of it was his idea, that the FBI was entirely responsible, and that he is legally innocent. Furthermore, after Finton was arrested in 2007 with radical Islamist materials and following his interview with the police, Finton claims to have been approached by the authorities to report on the activities of the Decatur mosque. He refused and he claims that the FBI was specifically targeting him because of this.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> United States v. Finton, 26.

<sup>38</sup> United States v. Finton, 7.

<sup>39</sup> United States v. Finton, 23.

<sup>40</sup> United States v. Finton, 17.

<sup>41</sup> “IL Federal Building,” Northeast Intelligence Network.

But the evidence, including the recorded conversations, suggests otherwise. However, even if, as Finton claims, he was “told” to do the things he did, he was not forced to do them. The FBI may have given Finton the gun, but they did not make him pull the trigger. The informant neither supported nor opposed Finton, but simply allowed Finton to vent while supplying him with seemingly viable options for taking his beliefs to the next level.

## 7. Connections

Michael Finton was not operating within a “terrorist network” and did not have any real connections with other terrorist groups. Finton believed he was working with al-Qaeda, but this was all part of the FBI’s sting operation; no real al-Qaeda agents were ever involved.

One more indirect connection to the general terrorist movement came in the form of his admiration of Anwar Al-Awlaki, “a Muslim lecturer, spiritual leader, and former imam who has been accused of being a senior Al-Qaeda recruiter and motivator linked to various terrorists (including three of the 9/11 hijackers).”<sup>42</sup> It is from his teachings and writing that Finton gained some of his radicalization, but it would be an exaggeration to claim Awlaki was solely responsible. Another connection may have also been established and in what is perhaps the most curious aspect of Finton’s case: the 2008 visit to Saudi Arabia.

Overall, it seems safe to conclude that Finton was self-motivated. His desire to attack America and to take its “war against Islam” to American soil came from his own thinking, not the teachings of some organization or person.

## 8. Relation to the Muslim community

Finton converted to Islam while in prison. In his eyes, it helped him find meaning in his life and stopped him from continuing on the path he had been headed down since childhood. After serving 6½ years of a ten-year sentence, he was granted parole and began sporadically attending the only mosque in Decatur, Masjid Wali Hasan Islamic Center.<sup>43</sup>

The mosque was Finton’s main source of face-to-face contact with other Muslims. Due to his weak attendance and to the rather “militant prison Islam” Finton believed in, he never gained much of a connection to his local Muslim community. Most people who knew him, Muslim or not, commented that all he ever wanted to talk about was Islam and how Muslims were misunderstood.<sup>44</sup> For those reasons, many within the community avoided him and did not care for him too much. Alex Iraq, a Muslim immigrant who owns a liquor store in Decatur, noted that Finton would approach people he believed were Muslim and make extensive efforts to form a bond and to talk about religion. “He was very excited to be a Muslim,” said Iraq, but the general attitude towards him was, so what?<sup>45</sup>

Part of the reason Finton may have continued down his radical path was because he was unable to make a connection with the more centrist general

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<sup>42</sup> “Finton,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>43</sup> “Finton,” *Wikipedia*.

<sup>44</sup> Rushton, “Man Accused.”

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, “Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot.”

Muslim community. He never abandoned the more radical form he converted to in prison; he did the opposite, further radicalizing. One can speculate, had Finton made a connection with someone in the Muslim community, he would have never become a terrorist.

### **9. Depiction by the authorities**

The authorities portrayed their arrest of Michael Finton as a classic case of excellent investigation and communication, a textbook operation in which ultimately the suspected terrorist was captured before he could cause any harm. Although the authorities were successful in “stopping” the attack, they were rather alarmist with the entire operation.

The investigation of Finton was part of a larger FBI operation called Operation Tripwire, begun in 2003 to apprehend sleeper terrorist cells before they could act. Some suspicious activities, such as buying certain products (i.e. large quantities of hydrogen peroxide), renting airplanes, trigger alerts to be investigated further.<sup>46</sup> However, the operation has, so far, only stopped attacks that were far from completion and stings often play out too perfectly: undercover agents are typically directly involved, the suspected terrorist is completely fooled, etc.

With this in mind, it seems Finton’s case occurred because the FBI wanted it to. They were the ones who gave him the “bomb” and put him in contact with “al-Qaeda.” They had valid concerns that, if they did not put Finton in a situation they could control, he would go off and act on his own (likely in the Middle East, out of their jurisdiction). Yet he had a serious lack of resources and skills. Therefore, their depiction of the events as the FBI again “saving the day” and making a great arrest is alarmist and irresponsible. They made Finton appear to be a much bigger threat than he was. Representative Aaron Schock, Finton’s “secondary target, said he was “grateful to the FBI for their fine work in preventing this terrorist attack,” even though he was never in any actual danger.<sup>47</sup>

### **10. Coverage by the media**

The media was fairly responsible and competent in covering the plot/episode of Michael Finton. Since the investigation of Finton was an undercover operation, the media had no information to report prior to his arrest. Once Finton attempted to attack the courthouse and was arrested, media coverage exploded for a few days, relaying the facts of the arrest and attack, Finton’s background, and the steps the government had taken to make the sting possible.<sup>48</sup> As more information was released, the media reported it, but his case eventually faded into obscurity after his indictment, with only news sources in the local Illinois area covering developments.

The general depiction of the events by the media, besides reporting the facts, was both almost comical and slightly alarmist. Comical because Finton

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<sup>46</sup> Jamie Holguin, “Fighting Terrorism With Trip Wires,” CBS News, October 29, 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Mike Robinson, “Man Charged with Plot to Bomb Federal Courthouse Building in Illinois,” TheGazette.com, September 24, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson, “Suspect in Illinois Bomb Plot.”

thought he was going to blow up the building with a truck loaded with a ton of explosives but was completely fooled. On the other hand, some of the coverage was alarmist: the thought that a white, redheaded American citizen could attempt terrorism against his own country can be frightening.<sup>49</sup>

Some of the more independent and left-wing news sources claim that Finton was entrapped in the FBI's "Operation Tripwire." Thus, one left-wing radio host, Greg Bishop, notes that all cases connected to this operation follow a suspicious pattern:

The story usually reads, "The Joint Terrorism Task Force disrupted a sleeper cell today and arrested one (sometimes it's three or four) person(s)." Basically, the FBI sets up sting operations for individuals or groups only to take them down with plenty of frightened, yet relieved citizens thanking the Feds. These acts are also met with plenty of editorials bolstering more funding for the Feds.<sup>50</sup>

Finton's case fits Bishop's model fairly well. Critiques like this, however, are in the significant minority and have not garnered much attention. Regardless, it is important to note such coverage.

## 11. Policing costs

The authorities conducted an intense 18-month investigation on Michael Finton, starting with his parole violation in August 2007 and continuing until his arrest in September 2009. The Joint Terrorism Task Force in Illinois (about 20 agents), as well as an unknown number of the local Decatur and Springfield police forces, played a major role in the investigation.<sup>51</sup> They recorded his conversations with the informant and the agent, tracked his movements, tapped his phone (neither confirmed nor denied by the FBI), and monitored his internet activity.<sup>52</sup>

Considering the length of the investigation and the man-hours required, having to pay the FBI personnel and local law enforcement involved, paying the confidential informant, organizing the arresting sting, and all the technology involved, saying the government spent millions of dollars on the case may be reasonable. However, there is suspicion the confidential informant conducted illegal activities at the same time, which would cause him to lose any monetary compensation (the total amount has not been made public).

Finton was indicted on October 7, 2009 by a grand jury of Illinois Central District Court. On November 23, U.S. District Judge David Herndon granted the defense's motion to move the trial to a different location; it was originally to occur in the very building Finton had attempted to bomb.<sup>53</sup> Herndon set a trial date for March 14, 2011, as Finton had just changed counsel and it would take a fair amount of time for the new counsel to come up to speed on the details of the

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<sup>49</sup> Rushton, "Man Accused."

<sup>50</sup> Bishop, "A Suspected Terrorist."

<sup>51</sup> "Joint Terrorism Task Force," *Wikipedia*. Web. Accessed November 30, 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Rushton, "Man Accused."

<sup>53</sup> Kurt Erickson, "Courthouse Bomber Trial Moved," *Qctimes.com* (Quad-City Times), November 23, 2010.

case.<sup>54</sup> Finton was arrested in September of 2009 and his trial won't even truly begin until March 2011. The trial could be long and expensive.

## 12. Relevance of the internet

Finton was a regular user of the internet, especially in the form of his MySpace page and posts on Muslim forums.<sup>55</sup> Using the internet, Finton broadcast his feelings on the government and Islam, although often in a much more subdued form than he truly felt: he was smart enough to realize proclaiming he wanted to kill American soldiers or the like was not a good idea. Most often he kept his comments to his opinions concerning America's war against Islam, often in the context of Israel and Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> Finton's MySpace page shows how dedicated he is to faith. Although the original page has been taken down (by whom or why is not known), screenshots show a background of a mosque with Arabic writing on it; he was not afraid to let the world know how he felt.<sup>57</sup> He also utilized muxlim.com, a website devoted to Islamic issues, where it is likely he came into contact with "Asala Hussain Abiba," the man who paid for his trip to Saudi Arabia and who's daughter Finton claimed to be engaged to.<sup>58</sup>

For the most part, however, the internet was not the most relevant part of Finton's case. It did allow for law enforcement to get a glimpse into Finton's mind, but did not offer much else. If the internet was in fact the way Finton came into contact with Abiba, that would raise its relevance, but that is mere speculation. Furthermore, there is no evidence anything Finton did in Saudi Arabia radicalized him further or gave him any terrorist training.

## 13. Are we safer?

I think not. Michael Finton was never much of a real threat. He had no training whatsoever and was mostly caught up in his desire for fame and the novelty of being a terrorist. He talked almost constantly about his beliefs and became more and more radical as time passed, but that's all he did: talk.<sup>59</sup> Any ability to act on his beliefs only arose when the FBI became interested in his case. Had the FBI operation not been conducted, Finton would probably have continued living his life without ever attacking America. If he did anything, it may have been traveling to the Middle East to fight as he suggested he might do numerous times. However, due to his lack of training and the scarcity of camps and monetary support, this is not a likely outcome.

Finton was a part-time fry cook at a restaurant and a convicted felon. He had little education (either academic or military), no family, was not in shape. He did have semi-coherent ideas about what was needed to save Islam, but he does not really seem to have the makings of an effective terrorist. He might have gotten

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<sup>54</sup> Erickson, "Courthouse."

<sup>55</sup> "Man Charged in Ill. Courthouse Bomb Plot." Cbsnews.com, September 24, 2009. Web.

<sup>56</sup> "IL Federal Building," Northeast Intelligence Network.

<sup>57</sup> "IL Federal Building," Northeast Intelligence Network.

<sup>58</sup> "IL Federal Building," Northeast Intelligence Network. United States v. Finton, 5.

<sup>59</sup> United States v. Finton, 9.

lucky in some sense, but he was nowhere near the stage where luck would even be a factor.

If Finton was not a serious threat in the first place, public safety has not been improved with his arrest: we are just as safe now as we were before. In this case, it seems that the FBI created the “danger,” not the terrorists.

#### 14. Conclusions

The case of Michael Finton has some strong similarities to the case of another American-born terrorist: Timothy McVeigh. Besides the fact both attacks were carried out using the same method, detonating a truck bomb in front of a federal building, Finton and McVeigh also share similar motivations.<sup>60</sup> McVeigh was outraged at the American government for what he believed were attempts to restrict the rights of American citizens, in particular gun rights.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, he viewed America as a “big bully,” committing acts of severe war in order to scare enemies into submission, as seen in the 1991 Gulf War, a war he fought in.<sup>62</sup> With his attack, McVeigh hoped to awaken the American public to the injustices of the government as well as force the government to reconsider both its domestic and foreign policies, that it could not continue down such a path unchecked by the common man.<sup>63</sup> Finton was also angry with the government for restricting/attacking his way of life, i.e. Islam.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, McVeigh and Finton had a lot in common when it came to their motivation for terrorism. The key difference between the two, however, is that McVeigh successfully build a bomb and then detonated it, while Finton didn't have a clue.

Finton had relatively firm political preferences that motivated him: America's foreign policy of fighting a war against Islam is unacceptable. At no point does Finton show any wavering from this belief. When it came to choosing how to retaliate against America, Finton considered his options and a variety of targets; he felt the best way to support the cause was a direct attack and an attack on a federal building would best get the government's attention.<sup>65</sup>

Finton is a textbook example of a rather unintelligent individual latching on to a radical idea in an attempt to make himself important. More noble motivations were involved as well, but in general Finton was another bumbling idiot who believed it would be “cool” to become a terrorist and to act out how he felt about the government and demonstrate his dedication to his religion. As far as terrorism goes, Michael Finton, as in daily life, was nothing special.

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<sup>60</sup> Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh & the Oklahoma City Bombing*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001, 1.

<sup>61</sup> Michel, *American Terrorist*, 160.

<sup>62</sup> Michel, *American Terrorist*, 166.

<sup>63</sup> Michel, *American Terrorist*, 167.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, “Suspect.”

<sup>65</sup> United States v. Finton, 21.