



OKLAHOMA CITY NATIONAL MEMORIAL & MUSEUM

DISCOVER EXPERIENCE LEARN

LESSONS FROM THE OKLAHOMA CITY BOMBING

PROVIDED IN COOPERATION WITH THE OKLAHOMA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

EFFECTING CHANGE: USING THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

GRADE LEVEL

High School

TIME REQUIRED

1 class period

SUBJECTS

United States History

Government

MATERIALS

- [Justice: Legislation video](#)
- [Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1997 text](#)
- [Victim Rights Clarification Act of 1997 text](#)

BACKGROUND/OVERVIEW

Civil liberties are defined as protection for citizens from the powers of government, provided by the Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment guarantees several of our civil liberties: freedom of religion, speech and the press, as well as the right to assemble and to petition the government.

The writ of habeas corpus is a provision that protects citizens against arbitrary arrest/detention by allowing a judge to determine whether the arrest is lawful. Following the bombing of the Murrah Building, habeas corpus became an issue for a group of family members and survivors because it was frequently used as the basis for a death penalty appeal. They worked together, and, through the legislative process outlined in the Constitution, succeeded in effecting the change they sought.

In May 1995, Glenn Seidl, whose wife Kathy was killed in the bombing, became aware of the length of time an infamous Oklahoma death row inmate had successfully avoided the death penalty. The convicted murderer, through the appeals process, was still on death row 17 years after being sentenced to death for his crimes.

Seidl approached the Oklahoma Attorney General's office and asked what could be done to limit the appeals process. The attorney general agreed to help, other family members and survivors became involved, and at a news conference on May 25, 1995, the group announced its goal to limit

the federal appeals process. They sought legislation to decrease the amount of time between appeals and to reduce the number of appeals allowed.

The group lobbied Congress and language to limit appeals was included in a new anti-terrorism bill, which passed the Senate in June but bogged down in the House of Representatives. Members of the group met weekly with the Oklahoma Attorney General's office to develop strategy, continued lobby efforts and began a campaign of letters, phone calls and trips to rally support. Despite all the efforts, however, Congress failed to pass the legislation before adjourning for the holidays in 1995.



In early 1996, members of the Oklahoma City group and family members from the 1989 Pan Am 103 bombing joined forces to lobby Congress to revive the appeals limitation legislation. Their efforts succeeded and the *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996* was introduced to Congress.



In March 1996, the core group began contacting other family members and survivors who joined them in keeping their message before congressional leaders. The *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996* passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law by President Clinton on April 24, 1996. Oklahoma lawmakers said the bill would not have become law had it not been for the work of these Oklahoma City families.

Shortly before the trial of Timothy McVeigh was to begin, U. S. District Judge Richard Matsch ruled that family members could not observe the trial proceedings if they planned to testify as impact witnesses in the sentencing phase. The *Victim Rights Clarification Act of 1997* was created to clarify existing federal law allowing victims to attend a trial and to appear as impact witnesses during the sentencing phase of both capital and non-capital cases.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the concept of habeas corpus and its impact on the death penalty appeal process.
- Students will be able to explain the impact of the legislation discussed in this lesson.
- Students will understand their rights as citizens to change or propose laws and the process by which such change can be accomplished legally and without violence.

PROCEDURE

- Discuss background/overview, including the fact that Timothy McVeigh chose violence as a means to demonstrate his disagreement with certain policies/actions of our government.
- Discuss the two pieces of legislation.
- Show legislation video.
- Facilitate student discussion about the motives and results in each case.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT/ACTIVITIES

- Reflect on the effects of these two pieces of legislation. What is their significance beyond the Oklahoma City bombing?
- Choose a state or federal law, or a school rule with which you disagree and create a plan for changing it through the proper legal channels.
- Access newspaper reports from the archives of *The Oklahoman*, from which students can follow the legislative process.

Access to The Oklahoman's Archives is free for teachers, courtesy of Devon Energy.