



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on January 6, 2020

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## When Big Government Conspires With Big Media Against One Man

For Richard Jewell, his temporary job as a security guard at the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta was an opportunity to obtain another position in law enforcement. In a few short days, the excitement of the festivities in Centennial Olympic Park would give way to the prospect of a life as an unemployed bachelor, forced to move back in with his mother.



Jewell admired law enforcement, and as he watched the crowd watching the rhythm and blues band Jack Mack and the Heart Attack, he hoped the contacts he was making with some of the scores of law-enforcement officers during the concerts held in conjunction with the Olympic contests would secure him another job in the field. He used his position near the tower built for AT&T and NBC to hand out cold soft drinks and water to officers on duty.

A conscientious employee, he regularly arrived up to 30 minutes early for his 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift, carefully observing the spectators and even looking under benches for anything suspicious. During his previous employment as a police officer and a deputy sheriff, Jewell had taken various law-enforcement courses, including education about explosives. From that training, he knew that the crowds in the park (numbering as high as 65,000 for a Kenny Rogers concert) could be at risk by someone with the evil intent to set off a bomb.

Around 12:30 a.m., Jewell caught sight of seven young men pulling beer from a green pack and horsing around. Always very observant, he also took notice of a second green backpack under a bench, which he presumed contained even more beer. As the boys littered the ground with empty beer cans, he asked Tom Davis, an agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI), who was the assistant commander of park security, to help him move the boys along.

But before anything could be said, the boys left the area. As Jewell conversed with Davis, he noticed that the large backpack had been left behind, causing him to ask Davis what should be done about it. Davis was unconcerned, assuming that either the boys or some other inebriated spectator had just forgotten it. Still, he joined with Jewell in attempting to locate the bag's owner.

Davis caught up with the boys, who said it was not their bag. Others in the area also told them it was not their bag. Jewell was concerned, and asked Davis, "What do you want to do about this situation?"

Davis thought Jewell was overreacting, but he finally relented and called in a suspicious package report



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at 12:57 p.m. Eight minutes later, two bomb techs — Bill Forsyth and Steve Zellers — arrived. Jewell ascended the tower steps and told the 11 people there to be ready to move out quickly if the package turned out to be a bomb.

Forsyth peered inside the bag and discovered the wiring, pipes, end caps, and timing device. As Jewell watched, he recalled the Bomb Response course he had taken four years earlier, and raced back up the tower to order the crews out. For the next several minutes, law-enforcement personnel began to push back the crowd from the device.

At 1:20, the bomb — later described as the largest of its type ever seen by ATF and FBI agents — killed one person (Alice Hawthorne, there to celebrate her daughter's 14th birthday) and injured over 100 others.

Without the observant eye and persistence of Richard Jewell, the death toll would have been scores, perhaps hundreds, more. Within a few hours, he would be known as a national hero. Within a short time after that, he would be known as the villain who planted the bomb, and his long nightmare would begin.

## **Richard Jewell Becomes a National Hero**

Atlanta had hoped the Olympics would revitalize the city. The city had begun pushing to bring the 1996 games to the city years earlier, and had been able to win out as the site over Athens, Greece, for the centennial, or 100th anniversary, of the reinstatement of the ancient games begun in Greece.

While the city's business and government leaders hoped the games would showcase their city, for Richard Jewell it was a paycheck, albeit a small one, until he could get back into the area of work he always dreamed of — law enforcement.

Named after famed race car driver Richard Petty, Jewell had a fairly normal upbringing, active in the Royal Ambassadors (the Southern Baptist version of the Boy Scouts) at the Brookhaven Baptist Church in Atlanta. He was adopted by his mother's second husband, John Jewell, and given his last name. Unfortunately, in Richard's first year at Georgia Tech, John lost his job, then abandoned the family, never to be seen again.

Richard Jewell was forced to quit college and take a job in an automobile repair shop, then went to work as a supply clerk for the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA). There, he made one good friend, Watson Bryant, an SBA lawyer. Bryant was a libertarian, who often fought his own agency over what he considered its mistreatment of small-business owners.

Eventually, Jewell landed a job as a security guard at Richway (now Target), where his quick eye caught several shoplifters. After initially being unsuccessful at obtaining his "dream" job in law enforcement, largely because he was overweight, he finally obtained a job as a deputy sheriff in Habersham County, about 80 miles northeast of Atlanta. There he took every law-enforcement course he could, to make himself a better cop.

But after five years working for Habersham County, he smashed his deputy's cruiser into a police car during some horseplay, and was demoted to working the jail. He quit, and took a job at Piedmont College, a Baptist college in Demorest, as a campus cop. Unfortunately for him, he developed a tendency to issue warnings outside of his jurisdiction, even after the campus police chief told him to stop, once again putting Jewell out of a job.



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This forced a move back in with his mother in Atlanta until he could somehow wrangle another law-enforcement position. With the great need for security personnel at the Olympic games, it was no problem for Jewell to get hired, putting him in the position to save scores, perhaps hundreds, of park revelers.

In the early morning hours following the bombing, Jewell was interviewed by law-enforcement investigators four times. By the next day, Richard Jewell was a national hero. He was interviewed by CNN, with its headquarters in Atlanta. While at CNN, he met then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, and then-U.S. Senator Sam Nunn, both of Georgia, who shook his hand and thanked him for his quick actions, which saved so many lives. NBC's Tom Brokaw, a newscaster greatly admired by Richard's mother, interviewed him. Katie Couric praised him in another interview. AT&T even gave him tickets to the Olympic baseball game.

## From Hero to Villain

But while Jewell was basking in national adulation, state and federal law enforcement had begun their investigation into who had planted the bomb. The Behavioral Science Unit (BSU) of the FBI began its work within two hours of the bombing, listening to a 911 tape in which a caller had said, "There is a bomb in Centennial Park. You have thirty minutes."

The profilers went to work. They quickly identified Jewell as a likely suspect, based on his background as a single white man living with his mother, and as a "wannabe cop." The report described Jewell as giving "every indication of suffering an inadequate personality and requires the trappings of a law enforcement officer (badge, uniform, etc.) to command respect.... Unfortunately, for him, he has lost his jobs in law enforcement and, therefore, is without those things which needs to feel like a complete man."

*Photo Credit: AP Images*

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The BSU theorized that Jewell had planted the bomb himself, then he had alerted other security about it, so as to make himself a hero.

An old acquaintance of Jewell who was then with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) ostensibly went over to visit his heroic "friend," but the agent was wearing a wire while they dined on lasagna at Jewell's mother's apartment. Fortunately for Jewell, he said nothing incriminating.

One could argue that the GBI and the FBI were simply doing their jobs in checking out the possibility that Jewell was the bomber, not a hero — after all, a local police officer had supposedly discovered a bomb (which did not go off) during the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, but it was soon uncovered that he had actually planted the bomb, desirous of being a hero. Nevertheless, there seemed to be too much focus on Jewell.

The case of Richard Jewell is a powerful demonstration of how myopic criminal investigations can become and, coupled with a media feeding frenzy, can destroy an innocent man. The president of Piedmont College and his police chief soon contributed to the frenzy, contacting authorities to inform them that Jewell was "in possession of 'how to make bombs' cookbooks." (Of course, the same thing could almost certainly be said about agents in the GBI and the FBI). Piedmont President Ray Cleere



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even told the GBI that Jewell “always wanted to be a hero.”

While the “lone wolf” thesis was applied to Jewell by investigators, based on the BSU profile, the 911 call was placed on a pay phone at the same time that Jewell was in the presence of multiple witnesses at the park. Discounting this contradiction to their profile, investigators modified their theory to conclude that Jewell must have had an accomplice.

At this point in the narrative, Jewell was still being hailed publicly as a hero, but a highly aggressive reporter for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (AJC), a young and attractive Kathy Scruggs, was able to wrangle the information that Jewell was the focus of the investigation from FBI agent Don Johnson, according to the book *The Suspect*, co-authored by Kent Alexander and Kevin Salwen. Alexander was the U.S. attorney in Atlanta at the time of the bombing.

Clint Eastwood’s movie *Richard Jewell* indicates Scruggs exchanged sex for the tip. In *The Suspect*, Alexander and Salwen note that Scruggs had a reputation as a reporter who “sleeps with her sources,” and routinely dressed provocatively. But since only Scruggs and Johnson would know the truth of the film’s implication that she traded sex for the tip (and both are now deceased), viewers should understand that movies often take what they like to call “artistic license” with historical facts.

However she obtained the information, her newspaper replaced the story “Guards’ Quick Thinking Saves Lives,” already on the presses, with her explosive article, “FBI Suspects ‘Hero’ Guard May Have Planted Bomb.” Managing Editor John Walter personally wrote the headline.

## **The FBI “Training” Video Ruse**

Before Jewell saw the rapidly changing media narrative, he was asked by the FBI to come in for an “interview.” On his way to the FBI building, some media camped outside of his mother’s apartment had asked him if he “did it,” leading Jewell to ask the agents if he was a suspect. Agent Don Johnson assured him that he was a “key witness,” and that they would like him to help them make a training video for first responders.

Always willing to help fellow “cops,” Jewell agreed. And no “cops” were greater in his estimation than those of the FBI. Unbeknown to Jewell, however, while the taped interview was going on, an FBI lawyer was next door working on the search warrant of the Jewell apartment. A prison cell was already prepared at Atlanta Federal Penitentiary for Jewell — if he confessed.

Johnson told Jewell to waive his Miranda rights as part of the training video, but Jewell saw through the ruse, and realized that they believed he was the bomber. Still, after failing to reach his lawyer friend Watson Bryant, he signed the form. In the movie depiction, Jewell did not sign it at all. At first, when Bryant called the FBI, an agent or someone unknown at the FBI denied Jewell was even present at their facility. But after listening to a phone message from Jewell, Bryant hit Star 69 to determine where his call had originated — it was the same FBI number he had just called.

The search of the Jewell apartment revealed he had 14 firearms, over a half-dozen knives, and the book *Outrage: The Five Reasons Why O.J. Simpson Got Away With Murder*. They even confiscated his mother’s Tupperware, which they ruined with permanent markers. (His mother’s eventual lawsuit netted her \$2,500 in compensation.)

Soon, the media’s coverage assumed Jewell as the culprit. Even the *Tonight Show’s* Jay Leno made jokes assuming Jewell’s guilt. One sports columnist compared Jewell to the serial killer Wayne Williams,



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also from Atlanta.

Jewell's lawyer, Watson Bryant, realizing his limitations as a commercial contracts lawyer, brought in a criminal defense lawyer (Jack Martin) and a civil litigation lawyer to help Jewell. After interviewing Jewell, Martin concluded that Jewell had not done the bombing, although he was amused that Jewell admitted to him that he had not paid his taxes in two years.

Despite an exhaustive investigation, the FBI could find no evidence that Jewell had committed the crime (although agent Don Johnson insisted until his dying day that he believed Jewell had something to do with it). Finally, U.S. Attorney Alexander and Jewell lawyer Martin met, and Alexander gave Jewell's lawyer a letter: "This is to advise you that based on the evidence developed to date, your client, Richard Jewell is not a target of the federal criminal investigation into the bombing on July 27, 1996, at Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta."

Two days after the non-target letter was released, Jewell met with the media. He told them, "I am a man who from July 30th until October 26th lived every waking minute of those 88 days afraid that I would be arrested and charged with a horrible crime, a crime I did not commit. For 88 days I lived a nightmare."

Jewell then addressed the way the FBI and the media had treated him during that time: "In its rush to show the world how quickly it could get its man, the FBI trampled on my rights as a citizen. In its rush for headlines that the hero was the bomber, the media cared nothing for my feelings as a human being. In their mad rush to fulfill their own personal agendas, the FBI and the media almost destroyed me and my mother."

Eventually, NBC settled with Jewell for \$595,000. CNN coughed up \$200,000. The *New York Post* handed over nearly a half-million dollars, and Piedmont College eventually settled for \$325,000. However, courts finally ruled that the *Journal-Constitution* had not committed libel, as it simply reported the fact that Jewell was the central target of the investigation.

Jewell eventually moved on to work in small-town deputy sheriff's offices, and married, but 10 years after the bombing, he died of a heart attack, at only 44 years of age. Before his death, Jewell would make an annual trip to Centennial Park to place a rose and a note on the spot where Alicia Hawthorne had died. After Jewell's death, his widow, Dana, continues the practice, only she now places *two* roses on the spot, one for Richard Jewell.

Fortunately, Jewell lived long enough to witness the 2005 confession, in open court, of Eric Rudolph to the Atlanta bombing (along with three other bombings). Rudolph is now serving a life prison term.

"The heroes are soon forgotten. The villains last a lifetime," Jewell told the Associated Press in an interview years later. "I dare say more people know I was called a suspect than know I was the one who found the package and know I was cleared."

*Photo Credit: AP Images*



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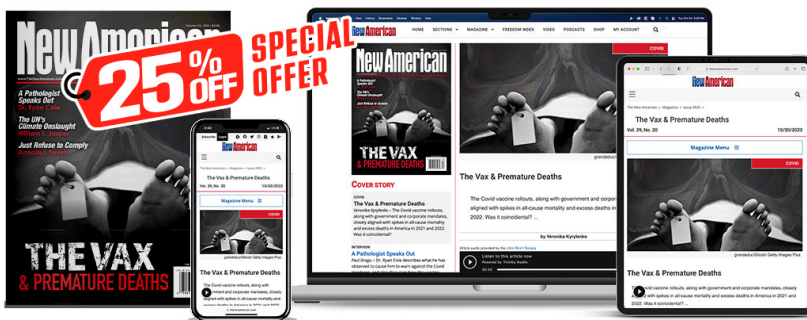
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