

Facing Trial Under Terror Law, Radical Claims a New Outlook



Rod Coronado, with his fiancée's daughter, Maya, at home in Tucson. Mr. Coronado, an ex-convict, says he has changed his radical ways.
David Sanders for The New York Times

By Randal C. Archibold

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TUCSON — Rod Coronado is a celebrity ex-convict in the underground world of environmental and animal rights radicals who advocate burning construction sites and research labs. In 2003, just after giving a speech in San Diego in which he called fire a “cleansing force” and defended its use in strategic property destruction, a woman asked him a question.

Federal prosecutors say Mr. Coronado’s answer — a detailed description of a crude incendiary — should land him in federal prison for 20 years for violating a rarely invoked antiterrorism statute.

The speech and subsequent exchange took place a day after a fire did \$50 million in damage at the construction site of a five-story condominium project in San Diego. “I wouldn’t be surprised if investigators found a device similar to this at the fire scene last night,” Mr. Coronado said after his tutorial, according to prosecutors.

A banner apparently left by the Earth Liberation Front, a radical group to which Mr. Coronado was once tied, had been found near the blaze with the mangled message “If you build it — we will burn it the Elf’s are mad,” and the group claimed responsibility.

The government said a device like the one Mr. Coronado described could have started a catastrophic fire, but it has not said whether a propellant was found at the scene.

After a grand jury investigation, Mr. Coronado, 41, was charged under a 1999 antiterrorism statute that prohibits “teaching and demonstrating” an explosive device with the intent of its use to commit a violent crime. His trial is scheduled to begin this summer in San Diego.

Mr. Coronado, who began in radical tactics by helping to sink whaling ships, says he had nothing to do with the San Diego fire and is the victim of a government vendetta. He has changed his ways, he says, working as a barista at a cafe in Tucson, planning to marry and promoting a lifestyle of organic gardening and “sustainable living.”

“I don’t believe anymore in illegal direct action,” he said in a recent interview.

But Mr. Coronado stands by his San Diego speech on First Amendment grounds and says he had a right to describe his life — crime and all — including how he once burned an animal research laboratory at Michigan State University. That crime inspired a wave of arson and landed Mr. Coronado in federal prison for five years in the mid-1990s.

“This law is too vague,” he said of the antiterrorism statute, adding: “We could walk into Barnes & Noble and Miller’s Surplus and buy manuals on how to build bombs. Those places are not being raided by the F.B.I. This charge is selectively used to prosecute people the government feels threatened by.”

Mr. Coronado’s arrest came in February 2006, a time when the Federal Bureau of Investigation was making several arrests in the West to try to curb the radical groups, which it blames for more than 1,200 acts and millions of dollars in property damage since 1990. Drew Ptasienski, a supervisory special agent in the bureau’s counterterrorism division, said recent investigations had disrupted but not dismantled the groups.

“I think our success over the last year and a half has made an impact,” Mr. Ptasienski said, though he added that such crimes remained on the rise.



A fire in 2003 destroyed a five-story condominium project in San Diego. The next night, Mr. Coronado gave a speech in the city, using a jug of apple juice to demonstrate how to make a crude incendiary device.

Courtesy of Rod Coronado

In the San Diego speech, delivered in August 2003, Mr. Coronado held aloft a one-gallon plastic jug of apple juice. Fill it with a mixture of gasoline and oil, he explained, “because gasoline burns too fast.” The device should be swaddled in cloth, lumber and other materials, he instructed, to promote a longer burn. Federal prosecutors and Mr. Coronado disagree on how the question was worded. The prosecutors say the woman asked him how to “make a bomb for an action.” Mr. Coronado says she said, “Tell us about the device you used at the Michigan State arson.”

In the interview here, where he lives, Mr. Coronado insisted that legal battles and prison time had taken a toll on him and his family — he has a 5-year-old son and a fiancée with a young daughter — and caused him to re-evaluate radical action.

“You can burn luxury homes all day and night, and it is not going to stop growth,” said Mr. Coronado, who time and again had defended such actions as essential to promote environmental awareness. “That is me speaking from logic, not from facing federal intimidation and prosecution.”

He was released from jail a few weeks ago after serving eight months for a conviction on interfering with a government-sanctioned mountain lion hunt here.

John N. Parmley, the assistant United States attorney handling the San Diego case, declined to comment other than to deny Mr. Coronado’s accusation that the grand jury had taken aim at him out of frustration with not finding those responsible for the fire.

“I understand his characterization,” Mr. Parmley said, “but it is wrong.”

Before Congress enacted the statute being invoked to prosecute Mr. Coronado, the Justice Department, in a report to lawmakers, raised questions about its constitutionality. Citing the widespread availability of bomb-making instructions on the Internet and elsewhere, it suggested that the measure be tailored more narrowly, but Congress declined to do so.

Mr. Coronado’s lawyers asked the judge in this case, Jeffrey T. Miller, to throw out the charge as unconstitutional, but he declined.

A few cases filed under this law are pending, a couple of people have pleaded guilty. Only one case has gone to trial: that of a Ku Klux Klan leader in Pennsylvania who had demonstrated a pipe bomb. That verdict was overturned on appeal, though not on constitutional grounds.

In Mr. Coronado’s case, the government has never said anyone acted on his demonstration.

The questioner in San Diego has been found, Mr. Coronado’s lawyers said, and they are seeking her cooperation. Two undercover police officers attended the speech and are expected to testify.

Just as important to the government’s case is Mr. Coronado’s penchant, no matter his current views, for advocating violence, which he did as recently as the summer of 2005, in an interview on the CBS News program “60 Minutes.” .

In a 2003 speech at American University, he exhibited a device like the one in San Diego, telling the audience it would help “destroy the profits that were brought about through animal and earth abuse.” In the San Diego speech he said, “When we’re addressing issues of buildings and institutions whose sole purpose is nothing more than the destruction of life, then there is no other way to deal with these places but through fire.”

Today, however, he sings a different tune. “I don’t believe anymore in illegal direct action,” Mr. Coronado said. “I’m not going to make an effort to condemn other people who still do, and I hope they don’t make an effort to condemn the things I now believe in.”