

To Spark a Fire:
How the Rise and Fall of the Branch Davidians Exacerbated Right-Wing Extremism and
Impacted Federal Policy

Aubrey Nelsen

B6 Honors International Studies/ A4 AP World History

Bill Topich/ Rachel Primm

23 May, 2022

Word count- 5181

Introduction

The social environment of 1960s and '70s America provided an ideal setting for the rise of new religious movements, NRMs.¹ Within this decade, the social and cultural landscape of the country underwent constant changes. Specifically, emerging in younger populations, there was a profound shift in values, mindset, and overall way of life.² This society embraced the idea of 'pointless relativism' and was growing significantly more accepting to conversations about stigmatized topics such as sex, drugs and adult authority.³ Such a turning point in American society was further prompted by the gradual secularization of everyday life, the urbanization of communities, and the escalated integration of immigrants into the US. As previously stated, these societal shifts forced many older generations into a more modernized way of life while producing an accepting, and diverse generation of young citizens. However, some refused to adapt to this societal change. Due to the desire to stick to traditional practices, American society became heavily polarized in a large number of social systems, such as religion.

Alongside this social transformation came an increase in the prevalence of cults, a social group that is defined and unified by abnormal religious beliefs. Despite their interchangeable use, NRM is a term more generally used in academia, and has a direct connection to religion beyond the 19th century while cult is used in a more modern sense.⁴ Based on this definition, the Branch Davidians, a religious sect based in Waco Texas, fits all the perimeters to be labeled as a cult that rose in America during the 1960s. Prevailing during the prime period for its own development, the Branch Davidians uniquely utilized their societal surroundings to evolve into

¹ NRMs is a more generally accepted term that is used to define a 'cult', a word that is commonly regarded in a negative light.

² Edward M. Levine, "Religious Cults: Their Implications for Society and the Democratic Process." *Political Psychology* 3, no. 3/4 (1981): 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791140>.

³ Levine, 36.

⁴ "Is It a Cult, or a New Religious Movement?" *Penn Today*. Accessed March 3, 2022. <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/it-cult-or-new-religious-movement>.

the infamous cult known on a national level. The complex existence of the Branch Davidians and their controversial demise left the American government vulnerable for critique; having a detrimental impact upon American society and federal policy.

Evolution of the Movement/ Sects Origin

Before evolving into the modern day movement seen in recent years, the Davidians came from a long line of breakaway sects⁵ that helped develop the ideology the branch practiced during Koresh's reign, the leader who led the movement to its ultimate demise. Originating out of the Millerite movement, the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) congregation was officially founded in 1863⁶, and similar to the Davidians, this specific SDA sect, was created by former follower Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian theologian. The simple existence of the Davidian SDA detrimentally impacted the original congregation due to their willingness to take people in and embrace a wider range of members.⁷ Under Houteff's leadership, he and his followers bought 189 acres of land on the edge of Lake Waco, a site that would later infamously be named Mt. Carmel. After Houteff's passing, former adherent Benjamin Roden took control of the movement, renaming it the Branch Davidians. Roden was incredibly successful in promoting the movement by spreading transparency and incorporating traditional religious beliefs, such as holidays, along with his more radical ideals within his teachings. Despite separating from the main church, Roden directed his teachings toward both the Davidians and the SDA, widening his audience and increasing the number of members.⁸

While Houteff and Roden both had some differences in their teachings, the two leaders built upon previous ideas and commonly used the SDA as a way to proselytize members. Houteff

⁵ A breakaway sect is a subgroup of a religious belief system, usually smaller than the main group of followers.

⁶ Albert Waite, 2000. "From Seventh Day Adventism to David Koresh: The British Connection." Andrews University Seminary Study Press, 107–26.

<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2630&context=auss>.

⁷ Waite, 108.

⁸ Waite, 108.

believed that the church needed to be reformed, a new divine messenger was to be selected, and decoding the book of Revelation was essential for fulfilling God's wishes. Roden continued teaching the fundamental aspects of Houteff's teachings but incorporated his own interpretations as well. Roden was extremely dependent on the use of scripture and unlike previous leaders, would prioritize morality rather than manipulate his way in order to establish control as seen with methods from past leaders.

Roden died in 1978, leaving his wife Lois to step into this prophetic position. Many were hesitant to accept this new leadership, resulting in the group splintering once again. When Lois began 'seeing' spiritual and prophetic insights, she introduced an idea that the Holy Spirit was female, a concept that would be later developed by David Koresh. Her abnormal visions attracted many to Mount Carmel, leading to her travels as a religious preacher. During this time, she became very closely acquainted with David Koresh, who, at the time, was still a part of the SDA and known as Vernon Howell. After his disfellowship, Howell made an impression at Mt. Carmel, leading a 4 hour religious lecture and more importantly, he became indispensable to Roden and the functionality of the group.⁹ When Lois died in 1986, Howell took over the position as the leader of the Branch Davidians, starting a new era for the movement.

Importance of Leadership in Relation to the Groups Success

Following Roden's death and Howell's initial rise to power, George Roden, Lois's oldest son, was determined to continue the family legacy and take control over the group. However, throughout Lois' leadership George was not well respected within the community, due to his failure to fully embrace their practices, and his claim as heir lacked legitimacy.¹⁰ After Howell was chosen to claim the messianic position following his mother's death, Roden took the

⁹ William Calborne, and Jim McGee. 2017. "The Making of David Koresh." Spectrum Magazine . February 7, 2017. <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2018/02/07/making-david-koresh>.

¹⁰ Calborne, McGee, "The Making of David Koresh."

initiative to forcefully take control of the compound. In an initial grasp for power, Roden exhumed the corpse of a long-deceased cult member, Anna Hughes, and stated that “whoever could bring [her] back to life would be revealed as the Branch Davidians true prophet”.¹¹ In hopes of obtaining photographic evidence of the crime, grave robbing, Howell and his supporters snuck into the group's compound before being met by Roden who was armed with a submachine gun.¹² Successfully expelling Howell and his faction at gunpoint, Roden resided at Mt. Carmel for two years before Howell came back to instigate another gunfight with the assistance of law enforcement officers. Roden was then arrested and charged with attempted murder while Howells case was declared a mistrial. Such an outcome is a result of the connections that Howell established within local authorities, further demonstrating the relationship between the group and their community.

Within 1990, Vernon Howell legally changed his name to David Koresh, representing his true embracement of the faith, while simultaneously marking the start of his leadership. Known for his charismatic, yet authoritative personality, these characteristics were important factors that helped shape Koresh as a leader, and could mainly be attributed to his childhood. His mother was a single, 14-year old highschool dropout when she had Koresh. After his birth, she married an abusive man, resulting in her asking her mother--Erline--to raise him. Koresh then moved in with his grandmother, yet was once again physically abused and subjected to the use of physical discipline throughout the rest of his childhood.¹³ Because of this prolonged abuse, Koresh was undoubtedly affected psychologically, with an unstable foundation to grow upon. In fact, an article from the Dana Foundation reported that “childhood trauma may fuel a range of persistent

¹¹ Calborne, McGee, “The Making of David Koresh.”

¹² Melissa Chin, “The Real Story Behind the Waco Siege: Who Were David Koresh and the Branch Davidians?” Time. January 31, 2018. Accessed January 24, 2022.
<https://time.com/5115201/waco-siege-standoff-fbi-david-koresh/>

¹³ Calborne, McGee, “The Making of David Koresh.”

psychiatric disorders", begging the question as to whether David was affected by psychological difficulties.¹⁴ In the media, David was described as delusional yet was never officially diagnosed with anything except a learning disability as a child.

Though David's disability resulted in an extended educational career, he was commonly described as an "incredibly clever child".¹⁵ Due to his challenges in the classroom, when Vernon turned 14 he decided that he would like to live with his grandparents in Tyler Texas. This short period of time exemplified the magnetic nature of Koresh, in the sense that he was always "fixing" things up and that "everyone that met [David] liked him".¹⁶ Since both his mother and grandmother were actively practicing Seventh-Day Adventists, Koresh was raised in the world of religion. While he had problems with formal instruction, Koresh always obeyed the strict moral codes within the Bible and applied the Ten Commandments¹⁷ with literal meaning.¹⁸ Given that his early life was ingrained with religion, Howell never had an issue embracing faith, it was the lack of control that became a problem.

As a young adult, Howell was a huge fan of music, specifically rock and roll. Due to his love for the raucous genre, Howell soon decided to take up the guitar, revealing him to be a real perfectionist due to his obsessive nature. His childhood girlfriend, Debbie Owens, noted that the most striking thing about Vernon was the effect he had on younger boys.¹⁹ His charisma was infectious and little boys, such as his younger uncle Kenneth, viewed him as their idol, a magnet for their attention. They respected his talent, brain, values, and personality, exemplifying how successful Koresh was at pulling people in and making them feel special. Over the years, and as

¹⁴ "Wounds That Time Won't Heal: The Neurobiology of Child Abuse ." 2000. Dana Foundation. October 1, 2000. <https://dana.org/article/wounds-that-time-wont-heal/>.

¹⁵ Calborne, McGee, "The Making of David Koresh."

¹⁶ Calborne, McGee, "The Making of David Koresh."

¹⁷ The Ten Commandments are a set of biblical principles that relate to the ethical and faithful aspects that are found when practicing Christianity. These precepts also codemn actions such as murder, theft, and adultery.

¹⁸ Clive Doyle, Catherine Wessinger, and Matthew D. Wittmer. 2012. A Journey to Waco. Rowman & Littlefield.

¹⁹ Calborne, McGee, "The Making of David Koresh."

he became more involved with the church, he began feeling guilty over his love of rock and roll music. In response, he got rid of his guitar and convinced himself that he was under satanic influence. Such a reaction illustrates Koresh's ability to relate everything to religion and his fixation with the church. This obsession was only enhanced by his consistent presence at Revolution seminars. These presentations, conducted by Jim Gilley, portrayed Armageddon utilizing multi-media and videos of earthquakes, religious persecutions, and pestilence to demonstrate the earth's fate (based on the events foretold in the Book of Revelation).²⁰ These meetings concentrated all of Koresh's years of Bible study into focus, putting meaning behind his religious past. He was convinced that it was time for a new prophet and given his own interpretations, he was led to believe that it was him who was granted this honor. In a manner that was out of the blue, Howell took an expeditious turn into the insular world of the Branch Davidians.²¹

Ideology

Koresh's first meetings were titled "The Serpents Root" and his interpretations were so well developed that it only took a few speeches before numerous followers became convinced David was the true messiah.²² Notably, this conviction is partially due to the willingness adherents had when listening to Koresh's teachings and how he uniquely expanded the scriptures to make connections with previous studies. Former Davidian Catherine Matteson recalled his "prolonged Bible studies" to last as long as "15 hours", however "it was never a bore", in fact many would beg Koresh to continue on with his teachings.²³ A large number of those residing at

²⁰ Doyle, Wessinger, and Wittmer, 75.

²¹ Calborne, McGee, "The Making of David Koresh."

²² Doyle, Wessinger, and Wittmer, 80.

²³ James D. Tabor, and Eugene V. Gallagher, 1995. *Why Waco?* Univ of California Press.

Mount Carmel believed that their adherence to Koresh would result in eternal salvation, making his word that much more meaningful.

With a heavy reliance upon biblical apocalyptic texts, Daniel and Revelation, David taught that God was one made up of two halves; the Father figure and the Mother figure (the feminine spirit that Lois Roden introduced, revolutionary to any previous teachings in mainstream christianity).²⁴ Koresh preached that Christ was an extension of himself, and when he was done with his work in human form (Jesus), he would return to the light of the godhead, the nature or existence of God. He viewed the Father and the Son as one and the same, just manifested in different forms. Though he did not preach a trinity²⁵, he acknowledged his existence as an extension of God and incorporated select passages found in stereotypical practices, once again mixing new and old beliefs. Despite the true purpose behind his teachings, most Davidians viewed David as a category higher than a prophet, mainly due to his thorough interpretation of common teachings.²⁶ Through careful word choice, Koresh was able to maintain a balanced distinction between God, the Father, the Lamb, and the Messiah. In this sense, Koresh never claimed to be Jesus, a frequent misconception when discussing the cult; he did, however, claim to speak the words of Yahweh God,²⁷ the supposed language of the first Father, further supporting his belief that he was a channel that God spoke through.

Within the sect, there was tremendous significance regarding the relationship between reality and the misuse of religious texts. The location of the Davidian compound was named ‘Mount Carmel’, which was a direct biblical reference to the famous, sacred place of worship

²⁴ Clive, Catherine, and Matthew 2012

²⁵ A central Christian assertion that views the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these three ‘people’ are seen making up the one God.

²⁶ Clive, Catherine, and Matthew 2012

²⁷Yahweh is consistently seen within the Hebrew bible (as well as the Old Testament) as God's most Holy name and debate has ensued over the pronunciation of said language due to its lack of vowels.

and home to Elijah's confrontation with false prophets.²⁸ This correlation intensified when David changed his name, aiming to mirror the biblical King David with hopes that it would help him succeed in the creation of his group. This focus upon the Davidic messianic kingdom is a direct relation to Koresh's perspective of his own role in Armageddon as the Messiah predicted for the Last Days.²⁹ Similar to former leader Victor Houteff, Koresh was under the impression that he would complete the chain of people whom restored major biblical reforms.³⁰ The line between scripture and reality continued to blur as Koresh began embracing his own sinful activities. In his own perverted way, Koresh would have sex with married women within the compound with the justification of him being the only one who had the authority to "give seed" and create children within his own "House of David" (once again referring to the biblical kingdom).³¹ He viewed these women as his own spiritual wives and referred to Psalm 45 to strengthen his claims;

You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy. All your robes are fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia; from palaces adorned with ivory the music of the strings makes you glad. Daughters of kings are among your honored women; at your right hand is the royal bride in gold of Ophir. Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention: Forget your people and your father's house. Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord.³²

Koresh would not discriminate based on age, and was known to marry young girls, his youngest being 10, to add to his group of around 20 wives, contributing to the allegations of child abuse and reinforcing preconceived stereotypes that he was a predator.

²⁸ P.G.R. De Villiers, 2018, 'The spirituality of apocalyptic and millenarian groups. The case of the Branch Davidians in Waco', HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies. November 22, 2018. 74(3), a5152.<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5152>.

²⁹ Tabor and Gallagher, 16.

³⁰ Tabor and Gallagher, 34-35.

³¹ Muriel Pearson, Spencer Milking, and Lauren Effron. 2018. "Who Was David Koresh: Ex-Followers Describe Life inside Apocalyptic Religious Sect Involved in 1993 Waco Siege ." ABC News. January 2, 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/david-koresh-followers-describe-life-inside-apocalyptic-religious/story?id=52033937>.

³² The Holy Bible. 2004. Hendrickson Publishers.

The use of religious terminology in substitution for traditional American vernacular also contributed to the lack of separation between the religious community and the rest of the public.³³ Koresh would relate the government's intrusion within Mount Carmel to the group's eschatological focus and prophecies, resulting in delayed negotiations.³⁴ David was insistent that he must complete his explanation of the seven seals of Revelation³⁵, as it was only known to the Lamb (himself), before he surrendered to the authorities. Considering his perspective on the seven seals, the standoff was a waiting period in which humanity was to be tested, in this case, by the US government.³⁶ Given any number of scenarios, Koresh almost always managed to connect daily occurrences to his prophetic teachings and preferred biblical texts, legitimizing his claim in the eyes of his followers.

Recruitment Tactics

In contrast to the stereotypes commonly surrounding the types of people that are attracted to cults, religious movements are generally interested in people who are white, wealthy, young, and can provide substance to the movement.³⁷ Individuals who have experienced neglect from an early age are known to seek the support and stability that cults seem to offer at a superficial level. Similarly, those who view themselves as weak or damaged are especially vulnerable to authoritarian personalities that appear comforting and charismatic—like Koresh's. A study based

³³ Lawrence E. Sullivan, "'No Longer the Messiah': US Federal Law Enforcement Views of Religion in Connection with the 1993 Siege of Mount Carmel near Waco, Texas." *Numen* 43, no. 2 (1996): 213–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3270347>.

³⁴ Edward Dennis, 2014. "Evaluation of the Handling of the Branch Davidian Stand-Off in Waco, Texas February 28 to April 19, 1993." U.S. Department of Justice. September 15, 2014. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/publications/waco/evaluation-handling-branch-davidian-stand-waco-texas-february-28-april-19-1993>.

³⁵ The seven seals of Revelation are symbolic seals that are seen in John's apocalyptic vision. They are believed to be the final judgments of God and are woven throughout the book in a non direct manner.

³⁶ David Koresh, 1944. "The David Koresh Manuscript: Exposition of the Seven Seals." <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/gopher/text/religion/koresh/Koresh%20Seals>.

³⁷ Levine, 38

on data from the Unification church³⁸ reported that 39% of participants said they had “serious emotional problems in the past” and 30% had sought hospitalization due to emotional disturbances.³⁹ While this specific criterion does not automatically mean that someone is vulnerable to the manipulation of cults, in these certain circumstances, it guarantees the desire of support and stability. When an environment is filled with uncertainty (potentially due to economic instability), lack of unification (a result of cultural shifts), rise of new religions (questioning of identity) , and a common desire to find greater meaning in life, a various range of people will be pulled towards someone who looks as if they could provide stability. The environment a cult offers could also prove to be ideal for individuals whose identification is directly parallel to their relationship with religion. Koresh deepens this relationship with his followers by convincing them that without him, a living prophet, they would be unable to read or properly interpret the Bible. Though the concept of brainwashing and the term ‘mind-control’ seems as though it is fiction, cult leaders have been known to utilize and manipulate critical thinking processes and emotional processing in order to gain and maintain control over their group members, therefore in a way, they are altering the decision making processes of their followers.⁴⁰ Unique to Koresh and the Branch Davidians, music played an important role in recruiting new members. Koresh would utilize his love and appreciation for the art to reach out to individuals, making them feel welcome and connected in a multitude of ways.

Fall of the Movement

³⁸ The Unification Church is a religious movement that teaches the concept that, with the help of the messiah, humanity can be restored from its corrupt state. The original leader of the sect, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, believed that God wanted Jesus to form a perfect marriage to save the fate of humanity. This hyperfocus upon marriage gave reason to Moons’s notorious mass weddings, an event that continuously put the group on the map.

³⁹ Levine, 40.

⁴⁰ Thomas Robbins, and Dick Anthony, “Cults, Brainwashing, and Counter-Subversion.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 446 (1979): 78–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1042698>.

The initial spark that caught the attention of law enforcement and media alike was the alleged legal transgressions associated with the group, specifically regarding federal firearm offenses and child abuse claims. These allegations led to the warrant that allowed the ATF to conduct its largest raid in history.⁴¹ An important distinction between the misdemeanors reported, note that no illegal stockpiling was taking place and the felony filed concerned gun registration taxes.⁴² Rangers recovered 305 firearms from Mount Carmel and estimated there were around 1.9 million rounds of ammunition-- including two 50 caliber semi-automatics, pistoles, assault rifles, and hundreds of grenades. Despite the large amount of artillery stored at the compound, technically, David had all the proper paperwork making the guns legal, however, it was their rebuttal against government officials that triggered the siege.

As for the child abuse allegations, the federal government accused Koresh of such charges along with the unsafe sanitary conditions present within the community. A multitude of primary accounts note that physical discipline was heavily utilized in the compound-- proving claims accurate and demonstrating a parallel to Koresh's own childhood. Dana Okimoto, partner to Koresh, spoke to ABC, the American Broadcasting Company, of her experience within the compound, specifically when raising her son, Sky. She confessed that children would face severe beatings with a wooden paddle for acting out of line or simply behaving like a child. In a specific instance, Dana recalled the brutality of the beatings to a point where Sky bled and bruised. Koresh justified such ways in the sense that God wished for the children to receive punishment for their sins or wrongdoings, and if he was not satisfied with the intensity of the disciplinary actions, he would pass along the duties to another mother in the group.⁴³ On a similar note,

⁴¹ Sullivan, 218.

⁴² Mark S. Hamm, 1997. *Apocalypse in Oklahoma*. Dexter, Michigan: Thomson-Shore Inc.

⁴³ Muriel, Spencer, and Lauren, "Who Was David Koresh: Ex-Followers Describe Life inside Apocalyptic Religious Sect Involved in 1993 Waco Siege."

David's confirmed sexual relationships with numerous children helped reinforce the claims held against him. His countless wives within a wide variety of ages strengthened the legitimacy of his position as messiah and demonstrated the dedication many followers had to the cause. Koresh's grandmother, Erline, suggested that his younger and inconsistent choice in sexual partners could also be attributed to the environment he grew up in, as well as the irregular relationships of relatives.⁴⁴

The standoff between the Davidians and federal government began on February 28, 1993, after a failed arrest and search warrant was attempted upon the compound. This endeavor led to the death of four ATF agents and an unknown number of Davidians were killed and wounded after entering the line of gunfire.⁴⁵ Almost immediately after the incident took place, negotiations began. Steve Schneider, Koresh's right hand man, led discussion from within the compound instead of the never present Koresh. In an immediate response, the FBI assembled a group consisting of its Critical Incident Negotiations Team (CINT), the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team (HRT), and a full Swat team to deal with the ongoing impasse. It was estimated that "between 250 and 300 FBI personnel were present in Waco at any given time during the siege", exemplifying the grandeur of the operation.⁴⁶

Upon the first few days of negotiations, a total of 12 adults would exit the compound, proving early negotiations successful. On March 23, Livingston Fagan exited the compound, marking the last adult to leave throughout the duration of the standoff. Gradually, the advancement of the negotiations began to decrease, forcing the government to focus upon the

⁴⁴ Calborne, McGee, "The Making of David Koresh."

⁴⁵ Stuart A. Wright, "Revisiting the Branch Davidian Mass Suicide Debate." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 2 (2009):4. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2009.13.2.4>.

⁴⁶ Dennis, 4.

different tactics that would force the group to exit the compound. One method that agents believed would prove successful was cutting the power in hopes that the Davidians would get too cold and wish to leave Mt. Carmel. On top of this, this decision proved advantageous as it showed that Koresh could not control the situation and the field agents hoped this would increase the number of departures. On a multitude of occasions and phone conversations, Koresh had to reassure agents that he and his followers were not going to kill themselves and did not plan to commit mass suicide.⁴⁷ On March 22, the scene commander, negotiation leaders, and tactical/behavioral scientists decided to induce higher levels of stress within the compound by the movement of vehicles, intensifying the feeling of confinement, and setting a deadline for the release of individuals. This tactic was used numerous times during the siege yet proved ineffective the more it was threatened. Other methods, though similar in style, were utilized in hopes to increase stress levels within the compound. At night Christmas music, recordings of negotiations, and Tibetan chants were played at high intensity volumes. They eventually began clearing property (cars, bikes, go karts) from the grounds and would shine bright lights upon the windows present on the exterior. The use of music as a harassment tactic could be viewed as a form of psychological warfare and was not received well by the public nor did it prove to be triumphant.⁴⁸

During every stage of negotiations, the mass media was closely involved in balance and decision making. On multiple occasions, the Davidian community demanded to be in contact with the media in hopes of spreading Koresh's teachings and to gain the ability to contact a lawyer so they could properly sue the US government. The Davidians would request news

⁴⁷ Wright, 5.

⁴⁸ Clyde Haberman, 2015. "Memories of Waco Siege Continue to Fuel Far-Right Groups." The New York Times, July 12, 2015.

articles that were regarding themselves and desired daily news coverage.⁴⁹ Most coverage of the Mount Carmel community would focus upon Koresh himself and the popularity of the media sparked a rise of anticult⁵⁰ ideologies. The media greatly intensified the severity and popularity of Koresh's child abuse allegations, . However, any and all attention that the media gave to the movement only aided their attempts in providing legitimacy to their cause.

On April 14, a meeting took place in the FBI's director office regarding the need to take military action against the compound. In the following three days, the Attorney General--Janet Reno-- approved the plan concerning the use of non-lethal tear gas. At 6:00 am on April 19, the operation began. Byron Sage--the lead negotiator-- called the compound to alert them of the assault and reassured them that the tear gas that would be used was nonlethal and their safest bet would be exiting the building. In order to limit any emergencies, medical care was present at the site and precautions were taken to contain the spread of the gas. However, unexpectedly, a fire broke out in 3 separate areas of the compound resulting in the death of 75 Davidians and only 9 survivors.⁵¹

Soon after the fire occurred, debate ensued regarding the perpetrator of the assault. Numerous rumors spread suggesting that the government was at fault due to their aggressive actions over the span of the assault, however an independent arson investigation revealed that the fire was deliberately started within the compound.⁵² Interestingly enough, a majority of the casualties associated with the fire have a different cause of death. Thirteen adult bodies and three young children were found with fatal gunshot wounds to the head while one little boy was stabbed in the back. Koresh himself died of a gunshot wound to the forehead and Schneider died

⁴⁹ Wright, 9.

⁵⁰ The anti-cult movement became a prevalent figure in the religious world in the late 1970s and generally opposes both cults and NRMs despite their apparent differences.

⁵¹ Hamm, 93.

⁵² Dennis, 20.

with a shot in the mouth.⁵³ While many theories dispute the order in which actions were taken as well as the intent of the deaths (whether this was murder or suicide), the evidence present and statements previously given contradict any supposition publicly reported. The official arson report notes that flammable accelerants were utilized to enhance the spread of the fire but does not disregard the possibility that the spread of the fire could have been enhanced by spillage of flammables caused by the FBI's belligerent breachings.⁵⁴ It is crucial to note that Koresh had mentioned if he was confronted by the authorities, the compound would burn.⁵⁵ The threat was not taken seriously but begs to question the government's commitment to the operation and the people themselves.

Public Backlash

While there were a multitude of factors that led to the demise of the Branch Davidian sect, the poorly executed methods and approaches of the government relate to a larger issue. When ATF was developing their plan of action for the raid, the randomness of the incursion was considered crucial to the success of the operation. Yet David Jones, a postman associated with the community, alerted a local news channel of the raid and pushed them to leak the information to the compound, allowing them adequate time to make preparations.⁵⁶ ATF was alerted of this fact by undercover federal agent Roberto Rodriguez, yet they continued to approach the premise using a "dynamic entry" in hopes that the operation would continue to run accordingly.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, this hastful plan backfired, leaving 9 dead and many injured.

The preconceived prejudices the government held against cults lead to assumptions regarding their true intentions and the structural functionality of the group. The situation became

⁵³ Dennis, 22.

⁵⁴ Dennis, 21.

⁵⁵ Sullivan, 221.

⁵⁶ Sullivan, 216.

⁵⁷ Hamm, 93.

more inflamed when the media labeled the Davidians as a cult, once again, due to the negative connotation associated with the term. Media influence (or lack thereof) during the standoff resulted in the story being told through various sources, allowing miscommunication to ensue and painting a distorted image of the sect.⁵⁸ Given the fact that the Davidians were a religiously-based movement, means that the government should have had expert consultants that were acculturated to the world of law and religion who could foster smoother negotiations with greater empathy. Instead, agents brushed off Koresh's desperate preachings as 'Bible babble' and treated the group like ordinary criminals, which ultimately worsened the situation.⁵⁹ Such negligence can be attributed to the belief that the relativity of religion in the situation was not present. At no point was any in house nor outside expert called to consult the ATF/FBI on the matter. Even behavioral scientists who were not well versed on the raid told enforcement that religion was a crucial part in properly connecting with the community.⁶⁰ A multitude of officials were against the government's consistent brazen show of force against the compound as it proved Koresh's scripture to be correct. It is argued that agents sought to prove they were in control and it is clear that law enforcement agencies did not care about the roles that they played within Davidian scripture.⁶¹

The Davidians viewed the attacks as the forthcoming apocalyptic showdown that was to occur between Koresh and the US government. This lack of knowledge about religion within law enforcement reflects the widespread ignorance about the nature and importance of religion in public policy and the culture of communities. The failed communication between negotiators and tactical officers, similarly, demonstrates the nonexistent communication between different

⁵⁸ Robbins and Anthony, 83.

⁵⁹ Sullivan, 220.

⁶⁰ Sullivan, 219.

⁶¹ Sullivan, 221.

government agencies. In reference back to the behavioral scientists, the refusal to listen to these experts exhibits the stubbornness associated with the US government. On top of this, the government earned criticism based on their immoral tactical pressures and allowing their judgment against Koresh to affect their decisions.

When discussing fear of the FBI, the argument can be distinguished into two sides. One side believes that the government did the best they could while the other views the discrepancies of their actions and feels as though the Davidians are the victims. From the latter would come the leaders of America's militia movement. The Davidian 'allies' believed that since the moment they were fired upon (which is still undecided whether this was the Davidians or the government that started shooting) they had the constitutional right to defend themselves against deadly force-- in this case, it happened to be the US government.⁶² Such argumentation unveils the discrepancies between government action and constitutional policies. This situation exemplifies the importance of balancing religious freedom and social order.⁶³ The lack of media attention makes it clear that the FBI did not wish to give the Davidians the voice they so desperately desired out of fear that their ideologies would 'undercut the fabric of society'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The fall of the Branch Davidians showed that the government's heavy-handed approach risked major loss of life, resulting in many questioning the FBI's ability to handle similar situations. The criticism against the government helped enact the changes necessary to run in a more thorough and efficient manner. As a result of the lack of communication, the bureau emphasizes the importance of proper communication through all departments. The FBI

⁶² Hamm, 95.

⁶³ Wright, 6.

⁶⁴ Robbins and Anthony, 80.

strengthened this point by creating the Critical Incident Response Group.⁶⁵ Now negotiating and tactical teams train together and agents work to understand not only their job but other roles so they can work cohesively in time-sensitive issues. Since the ATF sparked the initial conflict, whether this be purposeful or not, reform occurred from within the division. After Waco, the bureau invested in tactical equipment as well as improved weapons systems, standardizing the training of tear gas and automatic weapons. They also cultivated a relationship with the Los Angeles Police Department through the National Tactical Officers Association to establish how to properly deal with hostage rescues, warrant executions, and breachings.⁶⁶ In regards to constitutional values that should affect and apprise federal policies, religious freedom, though regulated, needs to be specified to create a more clear cut message.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the prevalent subsequent rise in right-wing extremist movements, militia movements, and white supremacist ideologies were directly impacted in relation to the events that took place at Mount Carmel. To many, Waco amounts to the tyrannical government that is willing to kill its own people, as seen within the beliefs of Timothy McVeigh.⁶⁸ He was extremely public about his agitation regarding the government's assault upon the Branch Davidians compound; in fact, McVeigh planned for the Oklahoma City bombing to be two years to the day after the fire. Federal Prosecutors began their case against McVeigh after he visited Waco and publicly expressed his deep-seated hatred for the government. The fire and death of the movement was the last straw that led to his decision to take out his hatred for the government in such a violent manner. Ascribed to the death of the Branch Davidians, 168 people were brutally murdered by McVeigh's actions, leaving society unsettled and heartbroken.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Haberman, "Memories of Waco Siege Continue to Fuel Far-Right Groups."

⁶⁶ Philip B. Heymann, 1993. *Lessons of Waco*. Washington DC: DIANE Publishing.

⁶⁷ Wright, 17.

⁶⁸ Haberman, "Memories of Waco Siege Continue to Fuel Far-Right Groups."

⁶⁹ Hamm, 100.

Bibliography

- “Cults and Religious Freedom in the United States .” Policy Perspectives. November 8, 2019.
<https://policy-perspectives.org/2019/11/08/cults-and-religious-freedom-in-the-united-states/>.
- Clive Doyle, Catherine Wessinger, and Matthew D. Wittmer, 2012. *A Journey to Waco*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- William Calborne, and Jim McGee, 2017. “The Making of David Koresh.” Spectrum Magazine . February 7, 2017. <https://spectrummagazine.org/article/2018/02/07/making-david-koresh>.
- Melissa Chin, ”The Real Story Behind the Waco Siege: Who Were David Koresh and the Branch Davidians?” Time. January 34, 2018. Accessed January 24, 2022.
<https://time.com/5115201/waco-siege-standoff-fbi-david-koresh/>
- Edward Dennis, 2014. “Evaluation of the Handling of the Branch Davidian Stand-Off in Waco, Texas February 28 to April 19, 1993.” U.S. Department of Justice. September 15, 2014.
<https://www.justice.gov/archives/publications/waco/evaluation-handling-branch-davidian-stand-waco-texas-february-28-april-19-1993>.
- P.G.R. De Villiers, 2018. ‘The spirituality of apocalyptic and millenarian groups. The case of the Branch Davidians in Waco’, HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies. November 22, 2018. 74(3), a5152.<https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5152>.
- “Is It a Cult, or a New Religious Movement?” Penn Today. Accessed March 3, 2022.
<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/it-cult-or-new-religious-movement>.
- Clyde Haberman, 2015. “Memories of Waco Siege Continue to Fuel Far-Right Groups.” The New York Times, July 12, 2015.
- Mark S. Hamm, 1997. *Apocalypse in Oklahoma*. Dexter, Michigan: Thomson-Shore Inc.
- Philip B. Heymann, 1993. *Lessons of Waco: Proposed Changes in Federal Law Enforcement*. Washington DC: DIANE Publishing.
- David Koresh, The David Koresh Manuscript: Exposition of the Seven Seals. 1944. MS, Reunion Institute, 1-17.

- Edward M. Levine, "Religious Cults: Their Implications for Society and the Democratic Process." *Political Psychology* 3, no. 3/4 (1981): 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3791140>.
- Muriel Pearson, Spencer Milking, and Lauren Effron, 2018. "Who Was David Koresh: Ex-Followers Describe Life inside Apocalyptic Religious Sect Involved in 1993 Waco Siege ." ABC News. ABC News. January 2, 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/david-koresh-followers-describe-life-inside-apocalyptic-religious/story?id=52033937>.
- Thomas Robbins, and Dick Anthony, "Cults, Brainwashing, and Counter-Subversion." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 446 (1979): 78–90. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1042698>.
- Lawrence E. Sullivan, "‘No Longer the Messiah’: US Federal Law Enforcement Views of Religion in Connection with the 1993 Siege of Mount Carmel near Waco, Texas." *Numen* 43, no. 2 (1996): 213–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3270347>.
- James D. Tabor, and Eugene V. Gallagher. 1995. *Why Waco?* Univ of California Press.
- Albert Waite, 2000. "From Seventh Day Adventism to David Koresh: The British Connection." *Andrews University Seminary Study Press*, 107–26. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2630&context=auss>.
- Stuart A. Wright, "Revisiting the Branch Davidian Mass Suicide Debate." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 2 (2009): 4–24. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2009.13.2.4>.