The Waco Siege: What Happened When the Feds Laid Siege to the Branch Davidian Compound

“The record of the Waco incident documents mistakes. What the record from Waco does not evidence, however, is any improper motive or intent on the part of law enforcement.”

Joseph Biden, U.S. Senator, Delaware (D) and member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which issued the Waco Investigation Report

The siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, is an important event in American history because it directly led to one of the biggest terrorist attacks on American soil – the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building. It’s not necessary to defend this act of terrorism to understand why the entire freedom movement of the time was so incensed by it. Indeed, it stood as a symbol of federal overreach and the corruption of the Clinton Administration.

It’s important to separate fact from fiction when it comes to the siege of Waco, just as it is important to do so with the siege of Ruby Ridge or the attack on the American consolate in Benghazi. With every event, it is important to stick to the facts and what can be extrapolated from them to make the strongest argument about what went wrong and why, and what could be done differently in the future.
BACKGROUND: WHO ARE THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS?

The Branch Davidians were a tiny offshoot of mainstream Seventh-Day Adventism. This stemmed from an earlier split between the main church and a group called Shepherd’s Rod, The Rod or the Davidians. It was effectively a reform movement within Adventism, albeit with some beliefs considered heretical by the mainstream church, none of which are important or relevant for this discussion.

The Branch Davidians were established some 20 years later, and a much more radical departure from Seventh-Day Adventism born from disappointment at the failure of earlier prophecies to materialize. There was some wrangling over the leadership of the group after the death of its founder, but Vernon Howell, better known to the world as David Koresh, ultimately won out over the wife and son of the founder.

Everyone liked Howell when he first showed up at the compound in 1981, including the head of the organization at the time, Lois Roden, with whom he had an affair, despite a more than 40-year age gap (he was in his late 20s, she was in her late 60s). He wanted to have a child with her, one that he believed would be the Chosen One of their religion.

Her son, George Roden, took over upon her death, which led to a power struggle between the two. Roden challenged Howell to raise the dead, going so far as to exhume a corpse for this purpose. Howell attempted to file charges against Roden over the grave robbing, but the police told him that more evidence was needed.

It was then that Howell and seven of his followers raided the compound armed with five .223 caliber semiautomatic rifles, two 22 caliber rifles, two 12-gauge shotguns, and almost 400 rounds of ammunition. They said they were trying to collect evidence of illegal activity on the compound, but forgot to bring a camera with them for that purpose. This was the definitive split where Howell won control of the Branch Davidian church at Mount Carmel. Those who did not follow him continued to use this name and argue that he was never rightfully in possession of it.
It was then that Vernon Howell became David Koresh, a name based on the historical King David and Cyrus the Great (“Koresh” being the Hebrew version of “Cyrus”).

By 1989, Koresh began marrying the members’ wives and daughters, some as young as 12, which was cited as a reason for the eventual raid. He claimed this came from an order from God. The men in the group other than Koresh were to remain celibate.

**THE SINFUL MESSIAH**

Koresh first began getting media attention from the *Waco Tribune-Herald* in February 1993. “The Sinful Messiah” was the name of a series of articles by Mark England and Darlene McCormick about Koresh and his followers. The articles mostly revolve around the child abuse claims and Koresh’s claim that he had over a dozen children, some of them with girls as young as 12.

Additionally, the group was suspected by local law enforcement of “stockpiling” illegal weapons. Local law enforcement alerted the ATF in May 1992, based on a call from a concerned UPS driver. By June 9th, the ATF had officially opened an investigation into the group.

This is perhaps the time to begin talking about some of the misconceptions or smears about the Branch Davidians. We are agnostic as to whether or not the group was a “cult,” as this can be defined differently by different people. However, the notion that Koresh kept his people in line with either mesmerism or fear does not square up with reports to Congress and elsewhere from survivors of the group. What’s more, rather than the dregs of Waco, many in the group were educated, most were religiously serious, and the group eschewed drugs and junk food.

Contrary to popular belief, Koresh did not claim to be the Second Coming of Christ, but rather to be a new messiah for a new age. The term “sinful messiah” was in fact one of Koresh’s own coinage, meaning that he was a messiah like Christ but, unlike Christ, had a sinful
nature.

The allegations of child abuse that prompted the final siege on Mount Carmel is even highly in dispute. Most of the allegations against Koresh come from either disgruntled former members or those involved in child custody battles. The church was investigated by state authorities but not prosecuted, because no solid evidence was ever found. That Koresh married a 14-year-old girl is true, but this would have been totally legal with parental consent at the time – so what were state authorities supposed to do?

Assuming that the allegations of child sexual abuse were true – and we consider them to be extremely dubious – what was the ATF or the FBI doing there? And how does opening fire, throwing hand grenades, poison gassing and burning alive children serve to protect them? These are the important questions which stand as a stunning indictment of federal law enforcement, even if one accepts that child abuse was taking place within the compound.

As with Ruby Ridge, the allegations of the federal government and their toadies in the corporate media are distortions (“Koresh claims to be Christ”), dubious (“Koresh is abusing children”) and, more to the point, irrelevant (“The Branch Davidians were cooking meth”). The FBI and ATF were on the scene in Waco for one reason and one reason alone: To serve a search warrant to determine whether or not the Branch Davidians were making automatic weapons.

THE RAID OF WACO

The actual events of the raid can be difficult to tease out. Each side disagrees as to what the sequence of events were.

What we know is that, based on an affidavit filed by Davy Aguilera, the ATF obtained a search warrant. This was based on the testimony of a postal agent about what he considered to be suspicious deliveries to Mt. Carmel. However, none of the deliveries were in and of themselves illegal, and included items such as 45 AR-15 upper receivers, and five M-16 upper
receivers.

The search warrant was mostly based on the number of weapons possessed by the Davidians. But in the United States of America, we have the right to own as many weapons as we can afford. What’s more, the notion that the Davidians were “stockpiling” weapons is a red herring: They were selling weapons (legally) in addition to buying them, so “inventory” might be the more accurate term for what they had at Mt. Carmel.

According to Dick J. Reavis, author of *The Ashes of Waco*:

“One of the prophecies that has been around Mt. Carmel since 1934 called for an ultimate confrontation between God’s people, or those at Mr. Carmel, and the forces of an armed apostate power called Babylon . . . Perhaps with that in mind, in 1991, the Davidians began studying armaments and buying and selling guns. He (Koresh) pretty quickly found out there is a lot of money to be made at gun shows and he and other people started going to gun shows. And they bought and sold. They bought items that weren’t guns, and they bought items that were guns. We now say, or the press now says, most people say, they stockpiled weapons. All gun dealers stockpile weapons. We call those stockpiles an inventory. There was an inventory of weapons at Mt. Carmel. A number of guys were involved in the gun shows, just as a number were involved in souping up and restoring cars, and just as a number were involved in playing in the band. There were circles or knots or subsets of people who had hobby interests that were only indirectly related to theology, and guns were one of those interests.”

The ATF’s raid, codenamed “Showtime,” was moved up one day in response to a local newspaper’s article on the Davidians. The local sheriff was not aware of the raid, but the Davidians knew it was coming. The ATF chose to raid the property rather than pick up Koresh while he was in town. An ATF agent who had infiltrated the group reported that they knew of the raid and that his cover was blown. When asked what they were doing when he left the property on the day of the raid, he said that the Davidians were praying.
There was another factor influencing the ATF’s decision to raid the Davidians when they did: Money. According to Henry Ruth, one of three independent reviewers of the Treasury Department’s report on Waco:

“With appropriations hearings a week away, a large successful raid for the ATF would’ve proposed major positive headlines for the agency. It would’ve helped counter the narrative of the ATF as a rogue agency. And it would’ve spread fear about radical fringe groups which would put pressure on Congress to increase its budget. Part of their motivation was to use the siege at Waco as a publicity stunt.”

There is much discussion and debate about who fired first, however, there is ample evidence that it was the ATF when they went to shoot the Davidians’ dogs in their kennels on the way to surrounding the compound. What’s more, the ATF showed up in a cattle trailer protected by a tarp, wearing no body armor. They were not dressed for an armed confrontation with apocalyptic religious extremists.

A ceasefire was negotiated by local authorities. The sheriff claims that the ATF only withdrew once they were out of ammunition. What this means is that if the Branch Davidians were the dangerous extremists they were portrayed as, they could have easily shot down every ATF agent either then or when they went out to recover their dead. They did not; the Davidians honored the ceasefire.

“They could’ve killed every ATF agent out there the day of the raid, had they kept shooting. But when they said they would leave their property, they quit shooting. They were highly protective of their property.”

Jack Harwell, Sheriff, McLennan County

And so began the 51-day standoff in Waco, Texas.
THE WACO STANDOFF

The standoff is frequently thought of as a benign and inert non-confrontation. However, this is untrue. While it's true that no shots were fired, there was a virtual constant low-level assault on the compound in the form of noise (rabbits being slaughtered, jet planes, pop music and other loud noises), threatening tank movements and poison gas, and flash bang grenades. Federal agents would frequently give the middle finger to or “moon” the people inside Mt. Carmel.

The tanks were used to crush the outer perimeter, out buildings, private vehicles belonging to the Branch Davidians, and were repeatedly rolled over the grave of Branch Davidian Peter Gent, despite protests from both Branch Davidians and federal negotiators.

While none of this is acceptable, two of these activities bear special examination: the gas and flash bang grenades.

The “tear gas” used against the compound was military grade, a type that can turn toxic very easily. The federal agents knew there were children and even infants in the house, children too small for any gas mask to cover. They shot the grenades in anyway, effectively considering the suffering of the children inside as acceptable collateral damage. Further, flash bang grenades are deadly and certainly violated the spirit, if not the letter, of the ceasefire.

Koresh became concerned with the safety of the group due to increasingly aggressive tactics. All told, 11 people left the Davidian house, all of whom were arrested as material witnesses, with one indicted for conspiracy to commit murder. Children inside were increasingly unwilling to leave Koresh’s side, especially once they learned that the children who had previously left had been separated from their mothers and other women in the group who had been caring for them.

Communication predictably began to break down. The FBI considered using snipers to take
out Koresh and other leaders of the movement, and feared a mass suicide. However, Koresh
denied such a thing was imminent and those leaving the compound had seen no plans in
place for a mass suicide.

HOW THE MEDIA PORTRAYED THE STANDOFF

Koresh and the Davidians watched what the ATF and other federal agents were saying
publicly about the initial raid during their 51-day standoff. The public narrative didn’t line up
with what the Davidians had experienced, making negotiations even more difficult:

Jim Cavanaugh, ATF negotiator: Well, I think we need to set the record straight, and that is that
there was no guns on those helicopters (used in the initial raid). There was National Guard
officers on those helicopters . . .
Koresh: Now Jim, you’re a d*mn liar. Now let’s get real.
Cavanaugh: David, I . . .
Koresh: No! You listen to me! You’re sittin’ there and tellin’ me that there were no guns on that
helicopter!?
Cavanaugh: I said they didn’t shoot. There’s no guns on . . .
Koresh: You are a d*mn liar!
Cavanaugh: Well, you’re wrong, David.
Koresh: You are a liar!
Cavanaugh: OK. Well, just calm down . . .
Koresh: No! Let me tell you something. That might be what you want the media to believe, but
there’s other people that saw too! Now, tell me Jim again. You’re honestly going to say those
helicopters didn’t fire on any of us?
Cavanaugh: What I’m sayin’ is . . . now I listened to you, now you listen to me, OK?
Koresh: I’m listening.
Cavanaugh: What I’m sayin’ is that those helicopters didn’t have mounted guns. OK? I’m not
disputing the fact that there might have been fire from the helicopters. If you say there was fire
from the helicopters and you were there that’s OK with me. What I’m tellin’ you is there was no
mounted guns, ya know, outside mounted guns on those helicopters.
Koresh: I agree with you on that.
Cavanaugh: Alright. Now, that’s the only thing I’m sayin’. Now, the agents on the helicopters had guns.
Koresh: I agree with you on that!
Cavanaugh: You understand what I’m sayin’?
Koresh: I agree with you.
Cavanaugh: OK, OK. So see, we’re not even in dispute and Steven’s getting all worked up over it.
Koresh: Well, no. What the dispute was over, I believe Jim, is that you said they didn’t fire on us from the helicopters.
Cavanaugh: Well, what I mean is a mounted gun . . . like a, you know, like a mounted machine gun.
Koresh: Yeah. But like that’s beside the point. What they did have was machine guns.

This distrust by the Davidians of the ATF and their lead negotiator, Jim Cavanaugh, helped exacerbate the standoff.

THE FINAL SIEGE OF MOUNT CARMEL

The newly minted U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno was unhappy with the progress being made at Waco, and invoked (what else) the abuse of children in her pitch for a resolution to the conflict. For his part, President Clinton, who had dealt with a similar situation as Governor of Arkansas in 1985 – with The Covenant, The Sword, and The Arm of the Lord – initially urged waiting out the group. Reno, however, cited antsy agents and budgetary concerns. Ultimately, Clinton told her to do whatever she thought was best.

The FBI Hostage Rescue Team – derisively nicknamed the “Hostage Roasting Team” and which denied any evidence of child abuse – came armed with 50 caliber rifles and punched holes in the walls of the building with explosives so they could pump CS poison gas into a building with small children and infants inside. The plan was to announce to the group that there was no plan to take the house by force while slowly pumping greater amounts of CS
gas inside to increase pressure on them to leave.

The fires began around noon on the final day of the standoff. The FBI maintains that they were started deliberately by the Davidians, with some survivors claiming that the FBI started the fires either intentionally or accidentally. Footage of the Davidians talking about gasoline seem to refer to them making Molotov cocktails to fight the FBI with.

Nine people left the building during the fire. The remaining people inside all died either from the fire, smoke inhalation, were buried alive by rubble or were shot. Some showed signs of death by cyanide poisoning, which would likely have been a result of the burning CS gas. All told, there were 76 deaths.

FBI claims in the 51 days during the standoff they never fired a single shot. Then 27 of the people in the compound died of bullet wounds. Then those were self-inflicted or inflicted by other members inside the compound. Federal investigators considered suicide as a possible form of gunshot death for the Davidians. It did not consider forced execution to be a likely cause of death.

An exchange between Sen. Chuck Schumer and Assistant Attorney General Edward Dennis in the Clinton Administration in the subsequent congressional investigation summed it up best:

Charles E. Schumer, U.S. Congressman, New York (D): We’ve heard that in the 51 days the FBI was involved, they did not fire a single shot . . . First, That would mean quite certainly that 27 of the people who died in the compound, I think the autopsy report showed 27, I may be off by one or two, who died of bullet wounds, those were self-inflicted or inflicted by other members within the compound . . .

Edward Dennis, Former Assistant Attorney General, Clinton Administration: I think that’s a key issue. The fact that Koresh was capable of setting the fire, of killing his own followers, that parents were capable of killing children, or adults were capable of killing children, really says more about the mentality of the individual that you were dealing with and the difficulty in trying
to figure out the best way to talk he and his followers out of that compound.

AFTER THE RAID

Today the only building on the site is a small chapel erected years after the raid. The building itself was razed. The incoming head of the ATF, John Magaw, was critical of the raid and made the Treasury Department’s Blue Book report on the matter required reading for incoming agents.

Nine Branch Davidians received sentences of up to 40 years for counts including voluntary manslaughter and weapons charges. Several other Davidians, including foreign nationals, were imprisoned indefinitely as material witnesses. Derek Lovelock, a British national, was held in McLennan County Jail for seven months, with the bulk of this time in solitary confinement. Livingstone Fagan claims to have been repeatedly beaten by guards at Leavenworth and other places. It was here that Fagan claims he was sprayed with cold water by a high-pressure hose before the guards put an industrial fan outside of his cell. Guards strip searched him every time he left his cell, so he began refusing exercise.

Over 100 civil suits were brought against the government by Branch Davidians and their surviving families. Most of these were dismissed before ever coming before a jury. Where cases were brought to court, the Davidians were ruled against. A jury in San Antonio, however, acquitted Branch Davidians in the killing of four ATF agents on grounds of self defense.

Perhaps the most important piece of evidence that the ATF fired first was lost. Houston attorney Dick DeGuerin testified under oath that the right-hand entry door to the building had only incoming bullet holes in it. A Texas state trooper testified that he saw two men load what looked like that door into a Uhaul. The Branch Davidians argued at trial that the condition of the left-hand door (i.e., intact) means that the right-hand door was not destroyed in the fire, but “lost” on purpose. There seems to be no better explanation considering how
buttoned down the crime scene was and the stakes involved in shielding the ATF and other federal agents from investigation.

The door was not the only evidence that was “lost.” The ATF’s footage of the original raid was also mysteriously (and miraculously, depending on what side you’re on) somehow lost. All this, despite congressional demands to produce both:

“I will just make one comment to the witnesses relative to the video and the front door. We have consistently asked as a committee to get a copy of the videotape which they now say is blank. We have asked for the door, and the door is missing.”

William H. Zeliff, Jr., U.S. Congressman, New Hampshire (R)

WHAT THE WACO SIEGE TELLS US ABOUT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The Waco siege does not provide any new or stunning insight about the federal government or how it operates. It does, however, confirm something that we know all too well: That when the federal government makes mistakes, its tendency is not to address and remedy those mistakes, but to double down, come back harder, and take every measure they can to conceal their wrongdoing.

However, there is another more sinister strand to this story: Did the FBI kill men, women and children because of budgetary concerns?

There is some evidence to suggest that they did. Federal law prevents the military from enforcing federal law. What’s more, any training that law enforcement agencies receive from the military must be paid out of their own budgets – unless the training is for enforcing “drug laws.” Late Congressman Steven Schiff of New Mexico testified that, ”In order for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to have obtained the military assistance they did receive, not because of the Posse Comitatus Act, but because of existing military policy, they misrepresented to the military that this was an anti-drug raid when it was never an anti-drug
raid.”

In David Hardy’s “This is Not an Assault,” he stresses, “Once the military trainers pointed out that the ATF would have to pay, the ATF suddenly claimed that the Davidians – who in fact eschewed hard liquor, tobacco, cow’s milk and junk food - were a ‘dangerous extremist organization’ believed to be producing methamphetamine.”

There is no evidence that the Branch Davidians were in any way involved in drug production. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that the federal government callously ignored the lives and safety of those inside to grandstand before cameras and justify bigger budgets.