

FBI vs. the Branch Davidians: Assembling an alternative understanding

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On April 19, 1993, live broadcasts of armored tanks and burning buildings flooded my TV screen. Flipping from station to station, I gathered that somewhere between 70 and 100 people were burning to death inside the buildings.

The news reports cut back and forth between live footage of the fire and replays from earlier that day of a U.S. government tank repeatedly smashing into the buildings. I could see dark spots where huge holes had been ripped into the exterior walls. Over these blurred, grainy images, newscasters explained that up until several minutes before the fire started, the FBI had used a specially-equipped armored tank to inject massive amounts of tear gas into the buildings during the preceding six hours.

What I was watching looked to me exactly like a military attack on civilians. Tanks and gas are blatant military weapons, and it's not surprising that a building would burst into flames after a six-hour assault. As the fire began to die down and it became clear that there would be only a few survivors, I haltingly told my lover over the phone that the FBI had just killed dozens of people on national television.

The site of the fire was a ranch on wind-swept prairie land several miles outside Waco, Texas. The dozen or so adjoining wooden structures there, which would burn to ash and rubble within only 30 minutes, had been home to a tight-knit community of prophetic Christians called the Branch Davidians. The ranch and surrounding area had also recently become temporary home to an encampment of FBI agents and reporters focussing a slew of weapons and cameras on the residents inside.

For seven weeks leading up to the fire, the Davidians had been surrounded in their home by hundreds of heavily armed FBI agents who circled the buildings with razor-sharp concertina wire and bombarded them at night with amplified sounds of rabbits being slaughtered. The FBI quickly moved in after a raid on the ranch by 100 other federal agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) had erupted in a 45-minute gun battle. That initial raid on Feb. 28 left four ATF men and several Davidians dead. It too was recorded live and widely publicized by the news media.

From that day on, the FBI and ATF labeled the people inside the buildings with terms that were repeated by reporters around the country. The words "apocalyptic" and "cult" became media catch-words. Another key word emerged when an ATF spokesman claimed only hours after the initial raid that mass "suicide" amongst the *cultists* was a clear possibility.

On the day of the fire, in stark contrast with graphic visual images of the tank assault, the FBI claimed almost as soon as the flames started that the victims had in fact participated in a suicide pact and lit the fire themselves. Newscasters repeatedly used the word "suicide" during the live fire coverage. The next day, it was used nationwide in newspaper headlines, sub-heads, and text. The Chicago Sun-Times went so far as to use a direct FBI quote for a two-page-wide headline which read, "Oh My God, They're Killing Themselves."

While I was still on the phone watching the live fire coverage, one on-location reporter heatedly said that half the photographers watching the buildings through high-powered telephoto lenses didn't believe the suicide story. He described the FBI's claim as "one of the greatest hoaxes" ever played on the American public. The strength of conviction it must have taken for this man to clearly say what he believed on live television, despite professional consequences, was impressive. I was surprised by his admirable candor, but not by the content of his words.

Having been involved in grassroots political groups for years, I was not naive about FBI tactics. I'd heard the Bureau implicated in everything from intimidating political activists to assassinat-

ing civil rights workers. On a more personal level, the alternative high school where I teach in Chicago was subjected to a surprise raid in June of 1983 when FBI agents and Chicago police took files and caused as much as \$40,000 in damages. Members of Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos High School say that absurd FBI claims about the building being used as a bomb factory were the pretext for the raid. Teachers say the school was actually targeted in an attempt to destroy its credibility among Puerto Ricans because it was exposing Puerto Rican students to alternative ideas about colonialism and radical independence movements. The FBI was eventually forced to publicly issue a statement distancing the school's name from terrorism, but stolen files were never returned and the damages never paid for.

Two years later the FBI was involved in an armed attack which killed 11 members of MOVE, a communal group of socially radical African-Americans. The circumstances of that attack bear a striking resemblance to the recent assault against the Davidians.

On May 13, 1985, MOVE's main house in Philadelphia was burned to the ground, along with 60 other row houses on the block, after an especially flammable explosive covertly supplied by the FBI was detonated on the roof. The fire ended a day-long shoot out between several MOVE members inside and hundreds of Philadelphia cops surrounding the house outside. Burned, dismembered bodies of six adults and five children were found in the rubble, some containing bullets. MOVE members, too, were labeled in the media as suicidal cultists and accused by the government of burning their own home.

Only two people inside the MOVE house that day survived: Ramona Africa, an adult, and Birdie Africa, a 13 year old boy.

Almost eight years later, on the day after the Davidians' home was burned to the ground, an Associated Press article titled "Texas Flames Evoke Past Attacks" in the *Chicago Sun-Times* quoted Ramona Africa as saying "It's May 13th all over again...I hope it is an example for people...to stop hallucinating about the system they're dealing with and realize that this system is insane."

Given the disparity between the term "suicide" and what I had seen on TV, my curiosity and healthy distrust of government agencies were aroused. Comments made by Ramona Africa and the admirable on-location reporter started me on a library investigation of events surrounding the attack on the Davidians.

My investigation spanned eight weeks and included over 60 newspaper articles from around the country. The majority of these were published between March 28 and May 28 in two Texas dailies, the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express News*. For earlier newspaper accounts, I read microfilm articles from the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. Also included in my research were archival magazine articles about the 1985 MOVE bombing, plus one book by Margot Harry called *Attention MOVE! This is America!* and another called *Burning Down the House*, by John Anderson and Hilary Hevenor.

One of the most striking points I learned about, and perhaps the most crucial to understanding information about the Davidians in the news media, was the degree to which the FBI seized control over information going in and out of the buildings where the Davidians were holed up during the 51-day siege.

Almost immediately following the original raid, contact between the Davidians and people outside the FBI was severely limited when telephone service inside the buildings was disconnected and replaced by a direct line to federal agents.

Similarly, members of the press were forced to move a minimum of two miles away from the site when the FBI arrived. Although the grainy, blurred quality of ensuing photographs and TV

footage hinted at this fact, there was very little mention of it by the media. One of only two direct references I found to this was a paragraph in the *Houston Chronicle* which succinctly stated the significance of moving the press so far away. It quoted Paul Fatta, a Davidian who happened to be away from the ranch on the day of the initial raid, as saying, “When the media was pushed way back more than two miles down the road, the FBI could say and do anything they wanted, and the whole world was just getting the information they were giving.” The same article also said Fatta believed the FBI had intentionally set the fire to flush the Davidians out.

During the second week of the siege, the Davidians began hanging large bedsheet banners out of windows in an effort to communicate with the world beyond the FBI. Two of these messages were, “God Help Us We Want the Press,” and “Rodney King We Understand.” The following week, after FBI spokesmen publicly accused the group’s religious leader, David Koresh, of effectively halting negotiations for surrender, the Davidians displayed another banner that read, “FBI Broke Negotiations, We Want Press.”

As far as I could tell, the only direct press contact permitted to the Davidians came within two days of the initial raid, when Koresh was allowed to air a 25-minute live interview and a 58-minute taped sermon on a Texas radio station.

After this, the only communication the Davidians were allowed outside the FBI (that I know of) was several face-to-face meetings and closely monitored phone conversations with attorney Dick De Guerin, who was hired by Koresh’s mother. Another attorney for the Davidians, Jack Zimmerman, was also present during some negotiation sessions, but was sometimes not permitted by the FBI to speak. Concerned relatives and friends were at no time allowed to speak with the people inside.

With such tight control over information and communication, government officials were able to make a series of unsubstantiated accusations and block any response from the Davidians. Much of the mainstream news media, having access to little material outside FBI and ATF statements, repeated these accusations daily. Emerging in the media was an image of the Davidians as suicidal, child-molesting cult members led by a madman fanatically bent on stockpiling weapons and explosives for a final confrontation with the U.S. government.

The Davidians were also specifically accused of converting semi-automatic weapons to fully automatic capacity. While the Davidians supposedly obtained this equipment with relative ease from an Illinois-based company in the weapons trade, it is illegal to actually make the conversions without governmental approval. This was the official explanation given for the February raid by the ATF, whose mandate it is to regulate arms flow within the U.S. The ATF additionally accused the Davidians of shooting first in the gun battle on the day of the February raid.

Many of these accusations have been seriously challenged by almost everyone — apart from government agents — who was directly involved during the siege, including attorneys De Guerin and Zimmerman as well as the nine survivors who managed to escape from the burning buildings.

De Guerin in particular has been an outspoken critic of FBI and ATF behavior in the case, saying that the government is conducting “a massive cover-up, a white wash” of its actions.

Approximately five weeks after the fire, De Guerin publicly released a lengthy tape-recorded telephone conversation he had with Koresh before the FBI disconnected the lines on the afternoon following the ATF raid. The *Houston Chronicle* reported that Koresh sounded tired on the tape due to being seriously wounded, but seemed agitated by government comments to the media: “They said we were throwing grenades at them, I mean, for crying out loud...you can’t believe anything they tell you.” The *Chronicle* stated also that Koresh sounded especially irritated by

government suggestions that the Davidians were considering mass suicide, saying, "That's not even sane, it irks me."

The accusation that the Davidians were suicidal was also refuted after the fire by several of the survivors including Renos Avraam, Jaime Castillo, Derek Lovelock and others. Louis Aliniz, a Houston man who slipped past the FBI and into the buildings during the siege, said he was convinced the Davidians hadn't committed suicide, due to their religious beliefs. He left the ranch two days before the fire.

Survivors also reportedly told De Guerin that those on the inside couldn't get out because some were blocked by fire and smoke, while others were completely immobilized by massive amounts of gas pumped in by the FBI. Survivor Jaime Castillo, in similar statements, refuted accusations that Koresh had used death threats to prevent people from fleeing the fire. Castillo said he personally had been afraid to leave the buildings because of the imminent danger he perceived from the FBI's attack.

Under the assumption that the government did not want an armed confrontation with the Davidians, the ATF's action in the initial February 28 raid was widely criticized in the media as being poorly planned. More recently, the Bureau's official statements about events leading up to and during the raid have been discredited by a series of contradictory statements and outright lies.

The ATF originally justified the raid by claiming that it was the only way to serve Koresh with arrest and search warrants because he never left the ranch. But preachers, merchants and other townspeople said in newspaper accounts that Koresh had been regularly seen purchasing goods in town.

The Bureau also claimed to have conducted the raid as soon as agents obtained evidence of illegal activity. Federal court affidavits by ATF officials later contradicted this. Agents allegedly discovered eight months prior to the raid that the Davidians might be illegally converting weapons. The *Houston Chronicle* reported that in the meantime, spies were planted in and around the Davidian's home while 130 ATF agents spent several months preparing for the attack.

Through a series of disclosures by high ranking ATF officials during Congressional hearings and legal testimony, it was also brought to light that the Bureau carried out the raid with supervisors' full knowledge that the Davidians had been tipped off by a telephone call. The ATF spy who had infiltrated and lived on the ranch, Robert Rodriguez, reported the telephone call back to the Bureau and advised that the surprise raid be canceled. ATF director Stephen Higgins also admitted that the Bureau invited six local press members and two from CBS news to attend the raid, ensuring national media coverage.

All along, government spokesmen contended that the Davidians fired first during the raid, setting off the gun battle that would leave four agents dead and 16 others wounded. The Bureau claimed that, having been warned the agents were coming, the Davidians had time to set up a surprise ambush.

Several people who participated in the gun battle, however, including anonymous ATF agents, Koresh, and Davidian survivor Castillo, were listed in newspapers as having said that the first shots were fired by ATF men.

Koresh was quoted on March 1 in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, "They fired on us first...the bullets started coming into the door." In the taped telephone conversation with De Guerin, Koresh said that the ATF's guns were "cocked and locked" as agents jumped out of cattle trucks.

Weeks later, after the deadly fire, De Guerin said he wanted to keep the federal agents out of the ruins of the burned buildings. "It's in the ATF's interest to jimmy up the crime scene to make it seem like they were justified in going in like the marines," he said.

In mid-May, 12 bulldozers hired by the federal government leveled the ruins. At that time, nobody outside law enforcement officials had been permitted near the crime scene since federal search warrants were still in effect. The closest that reporters would be allowed before the bulldozing, was 200 yards away, were they were escorted as a group by government agents. Zimmerman was quoted as saying, "I guess what it does, it forever prevents any checking on the ATF's rendition, that the fire was intentionally set" by the Davidians.

Jeff Kearney, lawyer to Castillo, declined to publicly state in the *Houston Chronicle* that the fire was part of an intentional government plan. He did say that the fact the buildings burned "is a benefit to the government...These government agents can say whatever they want, and there is little physical evidence to dispute that. I felt they knew that if that building was damaged, burned or destroyed it would be to their benefit."

The *Houston Chronicle* reported that the Waco fire trucks en route to fight the fire were held at an FBI checkpoint several miles from the buildings and that firefighters were ordered not to talk to reporters. By the time the trucks arrived, the blaze was out of control.

Although the heads of 12 corpses could not be recovered after the fire, the charred bodies of the 12 youngest children were found in their mothers' arms.

As of the end of my investigation, I had found no mention of any government agency clearly stating whether or not the Davidians possessed illegal weapons. The Texas Rangers released a list of weapons retrieved in the ruins, but ambiguous language made it impossible to discern whether any of these were automatic.

I was able to find almost no information about the Davidians' political beliefs other than a few intriguing details. Listed in the original search warrant, which prompted the entire siege, was a video critical of the ATF and writings which detailed Koresh's alleged hatred for law enforcement.

End note from E.R.

MEMO TO GOD (for future reference)
WE PRAY
YOU, DO NOT
SEND
THE MESSIAH
UNLESS
THE MESSIAH
IS
NICE
THE MESSIAH
OBEYS
AMERICAN LAWS
and
THE MESSIAH
CO-OPERATES WITH THE FBI

In order to rationalize events in Waco, a lot of rhetoric has been drawn from pop psychology. Koresh was “psychopathic,” “sick,” “suffered from paranoid delusions.”

There was also a kind of theologization of Koresh, so that he was spoken of as if he was Satan: the fires which consumed him were the flames of Hell. Not the flames of a burning home. This kind of rhetoric, on the covers of magazines and on TV, suggests they defeated the Devil down in Texas. But nobody defeated Satan. There was no Satan in Waco. There were people.

We never penetrate the facades placed before us, representing the “truth” of Waco. Nowhere have I seen any serious discussion of the consequences if Koresh really was the messiah. I am not advocating this view. But if you’re Christian, ask yourself why you did not ask: Could this man be the messiah? Must the True Messiah abide by the laws of an imperfect nation-state? Does resistance to the FBI prove a man or woman is not the True Messiah? Now, very few people believe in a Coming Age. If there really is a “God,” and if this God “sent” a divine incarnation to live among us, to usher in a millenium of perfect peace, would that Messiahb get good press? Or would we simply kill him?

Something to think about, now that a man is dead.

— E.R.

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