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The Waco Siege

Few events in history garner so much attention and speculation that they live infamously throughout the ages. One of these events is known as the Waco Siege. The events at Waco captured media attention for months as the battle between the Branch Davidians and the federal government raged. It was just one event in a string of many in the early 1990's setting the stage for a new wave of things to come in the realm of domestic terrorism in the United States. The day of the FBI raid on April 19<sup>th</sup> has been used by many other groups as a symbol for their attacks or actions. Unlikely predicted at the time, Waco ignited a firestorm that most people could not have predicated within the United States. The actions taken by government agencies at Waco has led to the inspiration of thousands of people across the nation. In fact, many domestic terrorist groups, specifically those belonging to militia movements and neo-Nazi groups, used the event as a tool for recruiting new members. The Oklahoma City Bomber, Timothy McVeigh, cited the Waco Siege as one of his many grievances with the federal government. These are just a few of the various legacies that Waco would become the face of or extremely important to. It would also become one of the most debated, misunderstood, and controversial events in U.S. history.

Vernon Howell, more well known as David Koresh, was the infamous leader of the Branch Davidians during the Waco Siege. He changed his name after taking control of the group, naming himself after prominent biblical figures. Koresh had not always been the leader of the religious sect and had gained power in the 1980's. In fact, he accomplished this by "taking its leader, a woman in her 60s, as a lover. When she died in 1986 at 70, there was a power struggle between her son and Koresh" (Catlin 2018). David Koresh did not have an immense amount of formal education when he came to Mount Carmel, however, he did have a command of his own unique interpretation of the bible. Many noted that he had a much different style of preaching,

“Koresh would speak of obscure Old Testament kings like Ahaz and Hezekiah as if they were household names. He didn’t preach. He threw out theories and ideas” (Gladwell 2014). This supposed knowledge of the Bible was something that would attract many followers from the Branch Davidians to follow Koresh with unwavering support. He even referred to himself in an almost prophet like sense when he took leadership of the group. Koresh told his supporters, “Koresh never claimed to be Jesus, but did refer to himself as ““the Son of God, the Lamb”” (Catlin 2018). This reverence to David Koresh led outsiders to believe the Branch Davidians functioned much more like a cult than a religious sect.

The Waco Siege was not the first time Mount Carmel or David Koresh would attract media attention for the wrong reasons. A fight between Koresh and another leader of the group would prove to be the first shots fired at Mount Carmel. After Vernon Howell had been ousted by another leader at Mount Carmel, he found a way to attempt to oust the new leader George Roden. Howell attempted to sneak on to the property with other followers to take pictures of a corpse which Roden had supposedly dug up in order to charge Roden with a crime (Pedrotti). However, this attempt failed miserably as the group was spotted and a gun battle ensued only to be stopped by the local sheriff’s department. The case went to trial, but the jury was hung on the verdict and the case was not pressed further. This demonstrated the lengths to which David Koresh was willing to go to in order to protect what he thought he was entitled to.

The Branch Davidians have a much longer history than many people realize as their first and only interaction with the group has to do with the Waco Siege. The group was originally based off a particular Seventh-Day Adventists millennial tradition dating back to the 1840’s started by William Miller (Gladwell 2014). The group did not completely agree with the exact same biblical interpretations of the average Seventh Day Adventist. The way in which they

interpreted the Bible makes it understandable how Koresh was able to be revered as an almost prophet like figure in the eyes of his followers.

The Branch Davidians belonged to the religious tradition that sees Christ's return to earth and the establishment of a divine Kingdom as imminent. They were millennialists. Millennial movements believe that within the pages of the Bible are specific clues about when and how the Second Coming will arrive. They also rely on what the Biblical scholar James Tabor calls "inspired interpreters," prophets equipped with the divine insight to interpret those clues and prepare their followers to be among God's chosen. (Gladwell 2014)

In essence, the Branch Davidians believed they were living out a biblical doomsday prophecy, but they did not know when it was going to occur (Pedrotti 2017). Due to this interpretation it is highly likely that Koresh convinced his followers that the raid by Federal agents was the impending doomsday they had been preparing for. It is understandable as many of the people had no idea of what this impending doomsday was supposed to look like and would have followed Koresh's directions for guidance on the matter.

The group also had a much longer history than most people would accept given how important David Koresh's role was in the organization. The Branch Davidians had been established in Waco for nearly sixty years before they moved to their current location amount Mount Carmel where the Siege took place (Pedrotti 2017). In fact, they were not hidden members of the community and were often seen in the city of Waco. This is something which would prove to be a missed opportunity for the Bureau Alcohol Tabaco and Firearms (ATF) agents planning to arrest Koresh without incident. The group even became the owners of store

selling firearms and survival equipment which helped to fund Mount Carmel (Pedrotti 2017). Being involved in the firearms business is also something which would also prove to be the undoing of the Branch Davidians. The number of people living at Mount Carmel often fluctuated, but the number was usually around one hundred.

One of the most interesting aspects of the group was the way in which marriages functioned, especially those who were married to Koresh. Many of the marital practices of the Branch Davidians were very often seen as cultish and were frowned upon by the world around them. Within the group Koresh had numerous wives, some of which were married to other members of the group. In fact, some of his wives were even related, “taking numerous ‘spiritual wives’ from among the daughters and wives of his followers” (Gladwell 2014). Koresh defended the practice by saying it was his right to do this because he was following a biblical prophecy. Not only did he believe it was his right, but more likely his duty as the leader of the group. However, many took issue not only with him having multiple wives, but at the age of some of the women he was marrying. Some of the women were alleged to be as young as thirteen or fourteen. These practices even made some members within the group leave. For example, “Robyn Bunds was one of David Koresh’s “wives” who left the community after she discovered that Koresh had begun a sexual relationship with her mother” (Pedrotti 2017). This practice was another thing which would come under strict scrutiny as the siege by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and ATF agents raged. It also gave the Branch Davidians a very negative outlook in the press and in the popular opinion of Americans when this information became public.

The original ATF investigation into the Branch Davidians occurred in 1993. The investigation began after the ATF received a report from a UPS driver who claimed grenade

casings had fallen out of a broken package intended for Mount Carmel (Catlin 2018). Years leading up to the raid there had also been many allegations of child and sexual abuse committed by David Koresh himself. Nevertheless, the ATF's main focus in executing the search warrant was centered around searching for the illegal unregistered machine guns and illegal destructive devices (DOJ 1993). The ATF also had an undercover agent that had infiltrated the group and was able to obtain sufficient evidence for the warrant. The ATF had reports of child and sexual abuse from multiple members who had left the group. An interview with a Texas social worker revealed that she had interviewed a girl from the group who claimed Koresh had sexually abused her on multiple occasions, but was told that those interactions were a privilege (DOJ 1993). Although unknown to the ATF at the time, the Branch Davidians had been alerted by their postman of the impending raid. This gave them time to prepare for the ATF's arrival which was unplanned. It is interesting the ATF chose to serve the arrest warrant for Koresh at home given how much he went out in public. It is something the ATF would come under harsh criticism for after the Siege had ended.

The initial ATF raid took place the morning of February 28, 1993. From the beginning there was lots of controversy and conflicting accounts of what would come in the next hours if not the rest of the tense standoff. When agents approached the door to execute the search warrant shots almost immediately rang out, but know one knew who had fired first (Wilkins 2018). After the first shots rang out, chaos ensued on both sides as gunfire began to fill the air. After the fact, each side made claims saying the other side had fired the first shots. There were some theories that an agent might have accidentally discharged his firearm or an agent might have discharged his weapon in order to dispatch one of the dogs on the property (Catlin 2018). Although it is

unclear who fired the first shots, the ensuing gun battle was something neither side expected would happen.

Since the Branch Davidians were alerted to the impending raid, they were able to prepare. Based on accounts from agents who were at the siege, they claimed to have received fire from multiple locations to include a water tower (Wilking 2018). The gun battle between the two groups resulted in an immense amount of carnage that neither likely expected to happen. After 3 hours of intense fighting and deaths on both sides, a cease fire was negotiated between the two groups. During those three hours, “Four ATF agents would be killed in total ... Numerous others were wounded. Five Branch Davidians were also killed in the shootout” (Wilking 2018). The cease fire allowed both sides to tend to their dead and wounded as well as regroup. Koresh himself had been shot in the hip during the gunfire according to FBI negotiations (Stone 1993). Little did both groups know that they were quickly becoming apart of one of the most controversial events of the 1990's. After regrouping the ATF Agents were relieved of their command and were replaced by the FBI.

Once the FBI took over the stand off was far from over and the controversy had just begun. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, the FBI began what be “the longest standoff in law enforcement history” (Stone 1993). The FBI began their operation by establishing a perimeter around the compound. They also started preliminary negotiations with Koresh in an attempt to ease tensions and attempt to evacuate the women and children from the compound. However, the FBI were behind the curve as they were coming in late to a situation in which they had not prepared for and did not have lots of intelligence specific to the Branch Davidians and their beliefs. One of the biggest tasks facing the FBI was trying to gather intelligence on the motivations of not only the Branch

Davidians, but the intentions of Koresh himself (DOJ 1993). There was also a lot of concern surrounding the safety and well being of the children inside the compound.

Negotiations with Koresh was one of the most important parts to the FBI's overall strategy. This was evident by the amount of they hand on hand in order to manage the situation. There were twenty-five negotiators assigned to the standoff which rotated in shifts so that someone was there all twenty-four hours of each day (DOJ 1993). Initially the negotiations were effective as there about Twenty members released from the compound in early March. This success did not last as time grew the negotiations began to deteriorate. Part of the strategy was to appeal to the parents inside by pleading to them to join their children who needed them. Part of the problem for the FBI negotiators was trying to figure out if Koresh believed in his message or if his leadership was nothing more than a power trip over his followers for his own benefit (Dennis 1993). The agents also had a difficult time explaining to Koresh that this event was not the prophetic doomsday the Davidians had been waiting on.

Negotiations were made even more difficult due to Koresh's unique interpretations of the Bible and its various passages. The FBI was not sure on how to approach the situation given the oddity that Koresh presented. With little luck after the release of the first few members in early March, the FBI decided to change its tactics. The new tactic was known as the "trickle, flow, gush strategy. The objective was to undermine the devotion of individual members to Koresh" (Dennis 1993). The FBI did this by calling individual Branch Davidians and telling about was being said in the negotiations in order to break them away from Koresh. The hope was that members would slowly come out which would then lead to larger numbers of the group leaving the compound. In reality, the tactic failed miserably as very few members came out after the strategy was implemented. Negotiations deteriorated even more after Koresh broke multiple

promises about leaving the compound and releasing more members. Koresh even promised he would leave the compound if his tape was played over a national broadcast. The government complied, but Koresh did not deliver on his promise. According to Koresh, “he was waiting for a sign from God” (Dennis 1993). Koresh continued to make excuses like these making the FBI negotiators question Koresh’s true intentions.

When negotiations started failing the FBI attempted to ramp up the pressure on the Branch Davidians by employing much more aggressive tactics. Many of these tactics were intended to make it uncomfortable for the Branch Davidians so they would eventually capitulate. There were many different things done including “floodlights, noises, loudspeakers, movement of military vehicles, shutting off utilities, fencing off the compound and discrediting Koresh at press conferences” (Dennis 1993). Negotiations still continued throughout this process, but the tactics were eventually unsuccessful, causing the FBI to rethink its strategy for the operation. This led to much debate within the FBI command on what action if any should be taken next.

While struggling to negotiate with Koresh the FBI also had to manage and delegate things to all of the other agencies that were involved in the standoff. There were a variety of national, state, and even local law enforcement agencies on hand to facilitate the crisis. There was support from the local Waco Police Department and the local McLennan County Sheriff’s office. Thirty-one Texas Rangers were on hand and were tasked with processing the crime scene (DOJ 1993). However, the Rangers left after the relationship between themselves and the FBI became strained over how the investigation was being done. Although the ATF had been replaced by the FBI as the lead on the crisis, they still remained in a supportive element. The main task of the ATF after the initial assault was to protect and provide security for the outer perimeter (DOJ 1993).

One of the most perplexing things to the FBI was the attitudes of not only Koresh, but the other people in who were still following him in the compound. Due to their beliefs, many in the group believed that their doomsday would involve a world ending conflict between themselves and the government. Most likely, “The February 28 ATF raid only reinforced the truth of Koresh's prophetic pronouncements in the minds of his followers” (DOJ 1993). One of the FBI’s biggest concern was whether or not Koresh would instruct the group to commit mass suicide as had happened in Jonestown. It was made even worse by the conflicting reports made by the people leaving the compound. Many claimed to have not heard any plans for mass suicide, but others contradicted that notion. The most startling evidence came when “On March 5, 1993, released child Joan Vaega had a note pinned to her clothes stating that her mother (Marguerita Vaega) would be dead by the time other relatives had read the note” (DOJ 1993). These conflicting accounts combined with behavioral analysis left the FBI at a loss on how Koresh would act.

With negotiations failing and the fear of conditions getting worse for the children involved, the FBI decided to become even more aggressive. After 51 days the FBI made their move on April 19<sup>th</sup>. The FBI agents used military vehicles to get close enough to the building so they could then shoot volleys of CS gas into the compound (Bunting 1995). Not long after this process began, the agents began taking on fire from within the building. Due to this, the Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) Commander ordered another round of CS gas be fired into the building (Dennis 1993). After this, agents began using the armored vehicles in order to create larger openings in the building for the Branch Davidians to escape. Not long after this one of the biggest controversies of the entire standoff would ensue.

After agents created openings in the building a fire began to erupt throughout the compound. Interestingly enough this was something the FBI had prepared for, but there were complications due to the situation. For example, “The FBI anticipated the possibility of fire. Fire trucks were kept far from the scene because the heavy weaponry of the Davidians was too dangerous to the fire fighters” (Dennis 1993). As the fire began to get bigger there were reports of shooting from inside the compound. Eventually only nine Branch Davidians would emerge from the fire and were subsequently arrested (DOJ 1993). Controversy surrounded this day because it was alleged that the FBI intentionally set fire to the building. However, statements made by the surviving members disprove this theory (DOJ 1993).

The aftermath of the fire was something the United States had not witnessed. In all, “Only nine survived the deadly fire, all others were killed -- approximately 80 in total, including around 32 women and 21 children” (Wilking 2018). Sadly, the FBI’s worst fears came to fruition. After the medical examiner concluded their investigation, they found that many of the Branch Davidians inside had died of gunshot wounds (DOJ 1993). Many of these gunshot wounds were to the head and chest and looked very indicative of self-inflicted gunshot wounds. Even Koresh himself died of a bullet wound to the forehead as he was likely killed by another member. Other members died from suffocation or smoke inhalation. Based on many of the autopsy reports, it seems that many of the members especially the smaller children were killed by another member before dying of smoke inhalation. The investigation also found that heavy winds and a large amount of extremely combustible materials contributed to the fire’s rapid spread (DOJ 1993). Many more investigations would ensue given all of the problems and challenges associated with the standoff.

Although the Waco siege occurred in 1993, its impacts can still be felt even today in the year 2020. Its specific impact was felt immensely in the realm of domestic terrorism in the United States. Many domestic terrorist groups in the United States have found interesting inspiration and use out of the Waco Siege. Most of this is due to the belief that the federal government drastically overstepped in their handling of the case against the Branch Davidians. For example, “Waco has not faded. Right-wing extremists regularly invoke it as a defining moment, proof of Washington’s perfidy” (Haberman 2015). Part of this surrounds the fact that the ATF was interested in the Branch Davidians because of gun violations. The thought of gun confiscation is something which often motivates many right-wing domestic terrorist groups and militias to action. Waco can often be used by these groups as a case study to recruit new members who are weary this type of action by the federal government might befall them.

One of the people most influenced by the events at the Waco Siege was Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh and his accomplice Terry Nichols. At the time it was the deadliest terrorist attack in American history, only to be surpassed by 9/11 in 2001. Both men often sighted their motivation for these attacks based on the federal government’s actions at Waco and Ruby Ridge that occurred just a few years earlier. McVeigh even went to Waco during the Siege and was interviewed in which he espoused his distaste for the Federal government (Reese 2018). He would often cite Waco as one of his specific grievances when asked why he perpetrated the attack. He said as much in a TV interview, “Waco started this war. Hopefully, Oklahoma would end it..., the only way they’re going to get the message is, quote, with a body count” (Haberman 2015). McVeigh was not alone in being inspired by the tragic events at Waco and likely will not be the last.

Since the Waco Siege ended in 1993, domestic terror activities have been increasing. There are many other factors such as the “Obama Effect” and struggling economic conditions which can be known to cause spikes in these numbers. However, the drastic impact of Waco cannot be overlooked. The data shows, “The number of Patriot groups rose sharply, to 858 by 1996, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center” (Haberman 2015). Even the date of the attack has become something very symbolic to many of those on the radical right. Timothy McVeigh picked the same specific date when he carried out the Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168 people. While this may seem like a coincidence, many of these terror events were strategically planned in order to reference the memory of the Branch Davidians and the Waco Siege.

The Waco Siege was one of the most influential events of the 1990’s regarding domestic terrorism. Its affects can even be felt today as many right wing terror groups still invoke its memory for recruiting and as motivation for their actions. For many it serves as a symbol of government overreach and failure. It was also served as a tragic, but yet critical experience for law enforcement. It is likely the tragic event will continue to live in infamy for many groups who feel the federal government has overstepped its authority. However, only time will tell how its affects will carry through in the future. Already it has influenced so many different people making its impact is immense.

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