

Mt. Carmel: Ranch Apocalypse
by Justin Killam

The tragic events that occurred in Waco Texas at the Branch Davidian complex called Mt. Carmel, or Ranch Apocalypse, is still in many ways, unclear and confusing. Yet the results are appallingly clear, approximately 80 Branch Davidians, 21 of which were children, and 4 ATF agents all lost their lives. How did this happen?, who's fault is it?, why did this have to happen? and how could it have been prevented are all questions that still, to this day 7 years later, need answers. In fact answers are still being sought after all this time, relatives of some of the victims of Waco have continued to seek legal action against the federal government, blaming them for the outcome. These trials have begun to come to a close earlier this year,

2000-SEP-20: According to DayWatch news service: "U.S. District Judge Walter Smith cleared the federal government...of wrongdoing in the deaths of 80 Branch Davidians during the 1993 standoff with federal agents at the cult's Waco, Texas compound. Smith laid the entire blame for the deaths at the feet of cult leader David Koresh. Special Counsel John Danforth and an advisory jury reached the same conclusions earlier this year." ([Http://www.ReligiousTolerance.org](http://www.ReligiousTolerance.org))

There is still an amazing amount of confusion in the details of this case. Numbers of casualties and accounts of events differ in many key areas of importance. So far it seems that most, if not all, direct sources about this case are untrustworthy, "Some seem to have intentionally disseminated misinformation in order to further their own agendas and/or to protect themselves and/or to project their religion in a very positive or negative light." (<http://www.ReligiousTolerance.org>) however, even those sources that might be forthcoming with a true account of what happened may still be unreliable with, "versions of events as they remember them to be, but which may have been colored by their intense emotional involvement." (<http://www.ReligiousTolerance.org>) And so the nature of this tragedy involving a cult continues to remain unclear.

In 1993, on Saturday February 28, 76 agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) approached the complex with search and arrest warrants on weapons charges. A firefought broke out which lasted approximately an hour, killing 4 ATF agents, wounding 16 other and killing an undetermined number of Branch Davidians who were better armed and had a greater amount of ammunition. The FBI were brought in and took over the situation. Negotiators began to form bonds of trust with the leader of the Davidians, David Koresh. They seem to be succeeding as ten children were released in exchange for getting media coverage for Koresh's preaching, but after securing the exit of everyone, Koresh fails to leave and from there things go down hill. Counter actions by the Negotiators and the FBI Hostage Rescue Team continue to worsen the situation. The entire siege lasts a total of 51 days, ending when the FBI move on the complex, injecting noxious gas into the building in order to drive the Davidians out. Fires are started within the complex somehow in at least three different areas and the complex burns down with the Davidians staying within. Many of the Davidians that stayed within the building were found to have died from gunshot wounds, including David Koresh who had a gunshot wound to his forehead, a few from being stabbed to death and the rest from smoke inhalation and suffocation.

The Branch Davidians have had an unstable and conflicted history. The church can trace its beginnings to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. In 1935 a Bulgarian immigrant, Victor Houteff founded The Shepherd's Rod, a split from the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, with a small group of followers that came specifically from within the ranks of Seventh-Day Adventist Church followers

as the theological beliefs that Houteff followed was based within the same theological church of his original church. In 1942, after a number of failed predictions and prophecies, Houteff renamed the group the Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists and created a separate organizational hierarchy. This hierarchy was theocratic, with Houteff himself at the head and his wife and mother-in-law with executive positions. He founded the Mt. Carmel community on its first site near Waco before his death in 1955.

Houteff's wife Florence assumed the head of the church and moved the community to its second site, farther away from the city. She announced a number of revelations based on decoding the biblical book of Revelation. The membership of the church grew greatly to approximately 1250 or so members. However after her prophecies failed the church fell to only about 50 members remaining at Mt. Carmel. In 1962 she announced that there had been errors in her predictions and left the community.

Upon her leaving Benjamin Roden, who had contested Florence for leadership after Houteff died, had the opportunity to take leadership of the church. He was able to gain the loyalty of the remaining Davidians, legal control over the community and rename the group the General Association of Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists. He set himself as the head of the theocracy as the successor to the biblical King David. He set his son as second and heir to the leadership of the church. However his wife, Lois Roden, began to have spiritual visions and was awarded ministerial credentials within the church. In 1978, after Benjamin died, she took the leadership of the church for her own and the church split as Lois and her son George fought over the mantle of leadership. Lois secured her place by succeeding in obtaining a court order, barring her son from the Mt. Carmel community.

Vernon Howell was born to a single mother and attended the same church as she did, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. He was disfellowshipped in 1983 after continuously attempting to preach his own theological views to the other church members. He became a member of the General Association of Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists and became close with Lois Roden. She named Vernon her successor and Vernon claimed divine inspiration, having visions and speaking prophecy. After struggles with George Roden, Vernon finally succeeded in claiming the community and church leadership for himself. Vernon referred to the church members as the Students of the Seven Scrolls, the name Branch Davidian coming from Benjamin Roden, in his attempts to take leadership of the church he warned the members to "Get off the dead Rod, and move into a living Branch." (Miller151) Vernon himself changed his name in 1990 to David Koresh in order to symbolize his spiritual status. David coming from the biblical King David and establishing Koresh as a descendant of him. Koresh is biblically a messiah, appointed to carry out a special mission for God.

David Koresh preached his own form of theological thought with himself as the savior of mankind. He maintained that Jesus had only saved those that had come before him and thus the world needed another savior. Unlike Jesus, who was a sinless messiah, Koresh was a sinful one, claiming to be better able to judge sinners fairly because of this. He saw himself as given a divine mission to open the Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation and that the end of the world would come soon. He took willing spiritual wives of the female members of the church, his duty to populate the earth with his divine offspring. He even renamed the Mt. Carmel community Ranch Apocalypse. In this eschatological world view the community began to stockpile munitions and provisions up to the point of the ATF assault. (The history of the Branch Davidians was summarized from the following sources, Miller 149-157 and Introduction to the Branch Davidians Web Site)

With the apocalyptic views of the Davidians and the assault by the ATF it is not surprising that a stalemate would be the outcome. At least it is not surprising to me, however throughout the 51 day encounter it seems like no one else takes into account the seriousness of these beliefs upon the Davidians within the complex. This combined with a multitude of other problems could unfortunately not have reached any conclusion other than tragedy to the confrontation.

The FBI, when they first moved in and took over the situation had two separate groups acting upon the situation. The first group were the Negotiators, trying to bring the situation to a peaceful surrender. They at first were able to gain a bit of trust from Koresh, having a number of the Davidians, including 10 children, released and getting Koresh's preaching aired on various media that he had asked for, such as the radio. They were even able to meet face to face out in the open with Koresh's second Schneider. However while they continue with the constant effort to reach a peaceful solution the second group, the FBI HRT (Hostage Rescue Team) continue in their own efforts to induce a psychological warfare upon the Davidians. Tanks and sniper positions are set up to be seen by the people within the complex. Refusal to deliver milk for the children, stunts such as cutting the power, blasting music and shining bright spotlights over the house at night do little except erode whatever trust the negotiators are forming and aggravate Koresh. The point that made the cooperation between the negotiators and HRT strain was when negotiators had Koresh give his word to have everyone leave after a sermon of his was aired. Everything was ready to proceed, children lined up at the door when Koresh backed out of his word, claiming that God had told him to wait. From then on the cooperation of the two FBI groups degenerated,

PETER J. BOYER: The Hostage Rescue Team already doubts the Davidians can be talked out of the compound. So here is Jeff Jamar's dilemma: His tactical guys want to show force. His negotiators worry that showing force will only undermine the fragile trust they're building with Koresh. BYRON SAGE: On occasions, I_ I made a number of trips up to the tactical sites located right out in front of the compound. There was one time when_ when there was a notation on_ on one of the portable outhouses up front that said, "Sage is a Davidian," obviously written by one of the tactical guys. (Waco: The Inside Story)

negotiators continued to try to bring the Davidians out, while the HRT acted either against the recommendations of the negotiators or without even informing them of their actions.

One of the problems that leads to the assault that ends the 51 day siege in tragedy is the misinformation about the state of the children. At the beginning of negotiations ten children were released and after being examined allegations of child abuse were made. It was this alleged abuse that got the assault plan approved, "This attempt to "save the children" resulted in the deaths of all the children in residence at the compound, and the allegations of child abuse were later proven to have been groundless." (Maaga 39) If this had not happened then the plan may not have been approved so readily and disaster could have been avoided.

The greatest problem of the entire situation was the total ignorance of the FBI in relation to the circumstances of the Branch Davidians and their religious beliefs. Some attempt was made to figure out whether or not Koresh believed in what he was preaching or if it was just a con. At first the negotiators deal with him as though he does in deed believe it, but after things continue to degenerate Byron Sage, one of the negotiators, confronts Koresh with this,

And I tell him that I am absolutely confident in my salvation and he's not in a position to challenge it. Now, if anyone was in a position to try to challenge my faith as a Christian, it would be someone that perceives himself to be Christ. He does not assume that posture. From that point forward, it is absolutely patently clear in my mind what we're dealing with.

This guy is not delusional. He is not a Messianic complex. He does not buy off on his own con. (Waco: The Inside Story)

In Byron's mind Koresh is just a con man and from then on the negotiations are effected by that view. Unfortunately regardless of Koresh's true belief, those that are in the complex with him do believe and from this miscalculation stems further problems.

The FBI's ignorance of the Branch Davidians theological beliefs continues, from the very first assault and Koresh's call to 911 where in the middle of a firefight he begins to quote biblical passages. It is obvious that the situation involves a serious religious importance and influence. Throughout the confrontation Koresh continues to try to get his message out and do what he believes is the will of God, "The identity of Koresh's followers, unlike that of most Americans, was shaped by their dedication to a transcendent cause." (Dawson 149) The FBI's response is to ignore his continuous "bible babble" (Waco: The Inside Story) and proceed as though it has very little to do with the situation.

This mistake and underestimation of the importance of this major influence within the situation leads to the disastrous end of the siege. Nearing the end of the confrontation Koresh had proclaimed that after the finish of his book, a book he was commanded to write by God, everyone would leave. Ignoring Koresh's devotion to completing the book which might have been finished shortly as well as the many signs that mass suicide was indeed something they were willing to do, the FBI pushed to have their assault plan approved. Many believe that once the book was complete Koresh would have indeed left, the FBI simply saw it as another stall tactic. Although when asked about it Koresh would deny it completely, there were many signs that mass suicide was indeed a possibility,

DAVID KORESH: Behold, the Lord will come with fire. And the chariots will be with flaming torches._the rebukes of flames of fire_ PETER J. BOYER: When the Davidians spoke of death, they often talked about fire. (Waco: The Inside Story)

Yet the FBI, when finally given approval for the assault, ignored the warnings and tried to gas the occupants out of the compound.

The events that lead up to the deaths of so many at Waco are a tragedy. It is clear that the FBI, both the HRT as well as the Negotiators were completely inexperienced with dealing with the situation and were ignorant to the true significance of Koresh and his group's religion,

The obvious and fatal insensitivity of the BATF and the FBI to the world-view of the Branch Davidians suggests that they were more interested in pursuing their own organizational agenda than achieving a peaceful end to the conflict. (Dawson 155)

However, this is in no way the complete fault of the FBI. Although they handled the situation poorly it cannot be said that blame has to fall completely upon them, the actions of David Koresh as well as his followers began the situation that ended badly. The original team of ATF agents had legal rights to search the compound. Also, although Koresh continued to assert that anyone who wished to could leave freely, any member that wished to needed to sit down privately with Koresh for an interview, only after which would they be allowed to leave. Finally it is known that during the final assault it was indeed the Davidians within that set the flames that ended so many of their lives. They had every opportunity to leave when the gas was pumped into the complex. It was a tragic sum of many mistakes, misunderstandings and religious zeal that lead to the events at Waco Texas.

Endnotes

Dawson, Lorne L. *Comprehending Cults, The Sociology of New Religious Movements*. Oxford University Press Canada 1998. (149 - 155).

Branch Davidians, a.k.a. Students of the Seven Seals.

Introduction to the Branch Davidians

Maaga, Mary McCormick. *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*. Syracuse University Press 1998. (39).

Miller, Timothy. *America's alternative Religions*. State University of New York 1995. (149-157).

Waco: The Inside Story