



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 9, 2018

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## The Waco Tragedy: 25 Years Later

*From the print edition of The New American*

The government moved before dawn to launch the raid. Persistent reports indicated that the rebels had stockpiled weapons, which the government had declared illegal. Although intended as a surprise attack, the rebels were forewarned. It is still shrouded in mystery as to who fired the first shot. When the brief shoot-out was over, several Americans were dead.



It was April 19.

On that April 19, 1775, the “embattled farmers” stood and fired the shot heard ‘round the world. The British military dictator of Massachusetts, General Thomas Gage, was determined to “nip rebellion in the bud.” He intended to do this by stripping away the guns of the American patriots who had resisted the British attempts to abridge their rights.

Since that day, two more significant April 19ths have taken their place in American history. One is the day that Branch Davidians died in a blazing inferno outside Waco, Texas, in 1993. The second was in 1995, when Timothy McVeigh and “others unknown” (in the words of the federal grand jury that indicted McVeigh) took revenge by bombing the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in downtown Oklahoma City.

The tragic events at the Branch Davidian complex were precipitated by the decision of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) to launch a raid on a religious compound known as Mt. Carmel outside Waco, Texas, because the bureau alleged that David Koresh and other leaders of the Branch Davidians (a splinter group of the Seventh-Day Adventists) were stockpiling illegal weapons. The initial February 28 raid was a disaster, leading to the unfortunate deaths of several ATF agents and Branch Davidians.

Then, on April 19, following a 51-day siege by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the compound caught fire and 75 Davidians died a horrible death. The FBI argued that the Bureau was a case of mass suicide, and that it had nothing to do with the fire. President Bill Clinton even callously dismissed their deaths: “Some religious fanatics murdered themselves.” But these may have been lies.

The final assault of the FBI was like a war-time military assault, complete with tanks flying American flags. After the tragic ending, someone even hoisted an ATF flag over the burned rubble.

## The Reason for the ATF Raid

Why had the ATF targeted the Davidians in the first place? Apparently, some disgruntled former members of the group alleged to authorities that their leader, David Koresh, had indicated that he wished to stockpile illegal weapons out of a desire to launch an assault on someone, though the ATF was always rather vague as to who that someone would have been. Actually, Koresh and other Davidians at Mt. Carmel did have a large number of weapons (about three for every person living on the



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property), but considering that the average Texan has four, that is nothing extraordinary.

The purpose of the weapons actually appeared to be more commercial: The Davidians worked through licensed gun dealer Henry McMahon, who purchased a large number of military-style semi-automatic weapons for Koresh to resell. Some additional gun laws passed during the first Bush administration had caused the prices to dramatically increase, and as is usual when a Democrat president, such as Clinton, enters the White House, demand for such *legal* weapons increases even more. McMahon said that these weapons were kept in boxes, and never used, so as to increase their resale value.

One of the Davidians, Paul Fatta, regularly attended gun shows around Texas, selling not only guns, but knives, camouflage clothing, and military “ready-to-eat” meals. Ironically, Fatta was not even present on the day of the raid, because he was at a gun show in Austin.

Once the FBI took over the operation, Bob Ricks became the face of the FBI to the media. He was assistant to the agent in charge; he was assistant to the hostage negotiator; and he was the official spokesman to the media. In 1999, this writer interviewed Ricks for an article in the *Oklahoma Constitution* newspaper. He told me that he believed Koresh’s motivation in stockpiling weapons was to “end up in a struggle with the government.” If so, the government certainly accommodated him.

In 1992, McMahon was visited by agents of the ATF and asked about Koresh’s gun purchases. According to Carol Moore, in her 1995 book *The Davidian Massacre*, McMahon immediately called Koresh, who told him to tell the ATF agents they were “more than welcome” to visit Mt. Carmel and see his guns. “So I walked back in the room, holding the cordless phone and said, ‘I’ve got [Koresh] on the phone. If you’d like to go out there and see those guns, you’re more than welcome.’” They declined.

When the government later prosecuted some Davidian survivors, the government was unable to provide any evidence that Koresh had bought or sold any illegal guns or anything else. Despite this, these allegations were used to obtain a warrant to arrest Koresh — a warrant they supposedly had to serve when Koresh was at the compound, not when he was away from the place. The ATF later claimed that they could not simply serve a warrant on Koresh when he left the compound because they contended he was not leaving Mt. Carmel anymore. Even Ricks told me this contention by the ATF was “not true.” The facts are that Koresh shopped frequently in Waco, just a few miles away.

After the raid, the ATF and the FBI offered other reasons to justify the spectacular raid, such as allegations of child abuse. But these were irrelevant. First of all, charges of child abuse are not within the jurisdiction of the ATF, or any other agency of the U.S. government. Second, the Texas Department of Protection and Regulatory Services had conducted an investigation less than a year earlier, and concluded there was no evidence to support such a charge.

Another accusation leveled at the Branch Davidians was that they were a cult, with very unusual ideas about biblical prophecy. But Koresh’s religious views and practices, while appearing strange to many secular and Christian Americans alike, are actually quite irrelevant, since religious liberty has long been a cherished part of our American heritage.

Even with all of these accusations, many Americans wondered why tanks were used at the compound. The government used the excuse that Koresh was manufacturing drugs at Mt. Carmel (he was not) as a legal pretense to secure military equipment. Dick Reavis explained in his book *The Ashes of Waco*: “The military may not take an ‘active’ role in civilian law enforcement, except when drug interdiction is involved.... Military personnel can provide a civilian lawman with a rifle, teach him how to use it, supply



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him with ammunition, even load his weapon for him. But because of the wishes of the Founding Fathers and the authors of the Posse Comitatus Act, soldiers can't pull the trigger."

To obtain such military equipment, including tanks and grenades, the ATF had to provide evidence of illegal drug activity at Mt. Carmel, so they manufactured some very flimsy evidence. In 1987-88, Koresh was engaged in a dispute with George Roden, a rival for Davidian leadership, over control of the property. Roden was eventually expelled from the property, but during the time that he was in control, he had rented some houses on the site to non-Davidians, who Koresh alleged were making drugs on the property. Koresh contacted the sheriff's office that a meth lab was left behind on the property after Roden's expulsion. The sheriff's office then came out and removed all the material that Koresh showed them.

Nevertheless, the ATF used this dubious allegation that a lab for making methamphetamines had been present on the property to obtain helicopters to help in the raid. Apparently, there was no drug manufacturing going on at Mt. Carmel.

## **The February 28 ATF Raid**

It is thought that one impetus for a dramatic raid was to help secure better funding for ATF. Even Ricks told me that the ATF desired a "spectacular effect" with its raid.

They certainly got that. Unfortunately, they also needlessly caused the deaths of both ATF agents and Branch Davidians. That result was almost a foregone conclusion, for as Agent Bill Buford said, agents were authorized to shoot anyone inside armed with a weapon when they launched their February 28 assault. And, several witnesses later testified that there was never any announcement that the raiders were law enforcement. One Davidian later said he thought it might be "some kind of anti-Christian group" making the assault.

Indeed, between 75 and 90 agents rushed toward the compound, screaming like Marines storming a beach. Agent Roland Ballesteros made his way toward the front door, which was now open. He recognized Koresh standing in the doorway, along with two others. Koresh was unarmed, and Ballesteros, with his shotgun pointed at him, shouted, "Police! Search warrant! Lay down!" Others were shouting similar commands.

Another agent, Joseph Patterson, said he saw nothing in Koresh's hands and did not consider him a threat. Patterson pointed a pistol at Koresh "in an attempt to get him to comply." As Ballesteros came closer, he said that Koresh asked, "What's going on?" before shutting the door. Agents said the first shots came through the closed door, although the ATF had already killed five dogs (pets of the children) at the beginning of the raid.

Koresh told David French of CNN, "I opened the door as they were running up.... They were in complete combat uniform, and they started hollering, you know. All of them hollered, I didn't know what they were saying." He insisted to CNN, "They started firing at me and so what happened was is that I fell back in the door and the bullets started coming through the door."

At this, Koresh said some of the Davidians started firing back, while he was shouting, "Go away, there's women and children here, let's talk." It is doubtful that the agents could understand Koresh any better than he could understand them, but the ATF already knew that women and children were inside the building they were shooting at.



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Of course, the front doors could have provided evidence as to whether bullets all came from inside, or all from outside, or both, but during the later FBI final siege on April 19, an armored vehicle dragged the doors away from the building. When the Texas Rangers later took custody of the property from the FBI and the ATF, only the left front door could be found. Though the left door showed no smoke damage, Dick Reavis wrote in *The Ashes of Waco*, “Ranger and ATF agents were only able to surmise that somehow, the missing steel door had ‘melted’ during the blaze. Yet other metal items inside — guns, cartridges, tricycles, cans of food, and kitchenware — and some items of glass survived the inferno.”

Despite knowledge of the presence of children, Agent Lowell Sprague later admitted, he fired at what he considered “threats,” which included a pair of hands in a window, and even curtains moving. As Moore wrote in *The Davidian Massacre*, “Texas Rangers testified that BATF agents in the undercover house three-hundred yards south of Mount Carmel were firing at the building. Rangers collected more than seventy used shell casings from in and around the undercover house.”

By the time the failed ATF assault of February 28 had ended, 10 people were dead — six Davidians and four ATF agents. Others were wounded in the battle, including Koresh.

## **The FBI Siege Begins**

That evening, the ATF agreed to relinquish control of the siege to the FBI. At first, it appeared that the bureau’s agents would be able to coax Koresh and his followers to quickly surrender. As a condition to giving up, Koresh asked for the FBI to first play an audiotope he had made, in primetime, on radio stations across the country. The FBI agreed, but then only played the tape on local stations in the middle of the afternoon. Koresh cited what he considered a breach of promise as his excuse not to surrender on March 2.

At this, the FBI began to take actions to make the Davidians so uncomfortable that they would come out of the compound. They cut off phone contact, except with them. They turned the electricity on and off. A few Davidians did surrender, but most did not, and on March 12, the FBI cut off their electricity for good. Next, they began shining bright lights at the Davidians’ windows, night and day (which, as it turned out, helped the Davidians read at night when their electric lights no longer worked), and used loudspeakers to blare sounds of screeching rabbits being slaughtered, along with several other sounds, such as clocks ticking. They even played Nancy Sinatra’s song, “These Boots Are Made for Walking,” with its famous line, “they’re going to walk all over you,” over and over.

FBI spokesman Bob Ricks said, “The music ... has been specifically selected for its irritation ability.” During the siege, which continued for almost two months, the FBI depicted Koresh as a cult leader with very unusual ideas about biblical prophecy. While irrelevant, this was intended to win over public opinion for the FBI.

*Photo: AP Images*

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When I raised the issue of whether the FBI’s final assault upon the Davidians was necessary, Ricks became very testy. He asked me what I would have done, then argued that Koresh was about to start killing the children inside of the compound.



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When I asked how he knew what Koresh was about to do, Ricks told me that “psychologists” had come to that conclusion, based on an analysis of his writings and statements during the siege. However, in the book *Ashes of Waco*, Ricks is quoted as saying, “There is nobody who can understand what this man [Koresh] is saying.”

Whatever Koresh’s intentions were, the compound did not become a raging fireball until after Attorney General Janet Reno ordered the final assault on April 19, 1993. Large quantities of tear gas were pumped into the buildings that housed the defiant Branch Davidians.

CS gas is the common name for 2-chlorobenzalmalonitrile, a white powder. More than one hundred nations, including the United States, had banned the use of CS gas during wartime; however, no restrictions on its use on a nation’s own citizens existed. Still, the FBI should have known the dangers: The manufacturers of CS gas warn against its use indoors because heavy exposures have caused deaths. Ricks adamantly denied to me the lethal effects of CS gas, but finally conceded that it was “possible” to kill a person if “you just drowned them in it.”

If the purpose of putting gas into the buildings was to force the evacuation of the buildings, it was an ill-advised method. The section of the *U.S. Army Field Manual* on civil disturbances states that persons are generally “incapable of executing organized and concerted actions” while under the influence of CS gas. The manual even asserts that “excessive exposure to CS may make them incapable of vacating the area.”

Worse, the FBI inserted the CS gas using flame-inducing gas grenades. After six years of denials that it used pyrotechnic devices (which can precipitate fires) on the Davidian compound, the FBI reluctantly admitted in 1999 that such devices had been used. According to the *Dallas Morning News*, a 40 mm incendiary grenade was used “that releases tear gas with a burning explosive capable of sparking fires.”

Though for more than six years, the FBI insisted that nothing it did could have caused the fatal blaze that engulfed Mt. Carmel, it was lying. In his interview with me in 1999, Ricks adamantly still held to the story that the Davidians had started the fire themselves. The FBI had managed to get multiple listening devices in the compound, and there are audio tapes wherein it sounds as if some Davidians are planning to start fires during the assault. Whether those fires would be for warmth, defense, or suicide, we don’t know for sure. While Ricks was a top assistant of the FBI agent in charge during the Waco siege, he told me that he was “not aware” that pyrotechnic devices were used to deliver CS gas. Even though he was “not aware” of the use of pyrotechnic devices (which could have certainly started a fire when mixed with CS gas), he insisted in our interview that the pyrotechnic devices of which he was “not aware” did not start a fire. He insisted that he was confident that the pyrotechnic devices of which he was “not aware” were not fired at any part of the compound where the fires erupted. Instead, Ricks supported the FBI contention that the tear gas grenades (which the FBI had lied about for over six years) bounced harmlessly off a concrete structure without causing any significant damage.

### **The Final Assault**

The final assault added to the carnage: In *The Ashes of Waco*, Dick Reavis wrote, “Surviving residents say that in making their entries, the tanks knocked over lanterns and cans of fuel, and crushed pressurized tanks filled with liquefied propane gas, a volatile heating and cooking fuel.”

Respected British journalist Ambrose Evans-Pritchard wrote in his book *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton*,

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“Infants too young to use masks were subjected to six hours’ exposure to CS gas.” Many experts contend that some of the babies could have died from the gas alone, even without the fire.

“It is my contention that every salient fact put forward by the Clinton Administration about Waco is a lie. I do not believe that the Branch Davidians were stockpiling weapons for offensive action, or any action,” Evans-Pritchard wrote. When some of the Davidians were later put on trial, jury foreman Sarah Bain said, “The federal government was absolutely out of control here. We spoke in the jury room about the fact that the wrong people were on trial, that it should have been the ones who planned the raid and orchestrated it and insisted on carrying out this plan who should have been on trial.”

Evans-Pritchard contends that it is likely that the flammable residue from the CS gas was ignited by accident, perhaps by a tank smashing into a fuel lantern during the final assault on April 19, 1993 (when the Davidians’ electricity was cut off, they resorted to using lanterns). Another possibility, Evans-Pritchard offered, was that the flash-bang grenades or other explosives used by the FBI precipitated the fire.

The use of tanks in the final assault has raised other questions. It is illegal, without a presidential waiver, to use any part of the army to execute the laws. On an Oklahoma City radio station (KTOK), Ricks denied to host Mike McCarville that there were any Delta Force military “operatives” present at Mt. Carmel. Ricks explained that they were only there as observers, in case the FBI needed their assistance.

Of course, the official position of the U.S. government was that the Davidians had set the fire themselves. Before the final assault on April 19, Ricks told reporters that the FBI was confident that the Davidians would not commit mass suicide, but after the inferno engulfed Mt. Carmel that afternoon, he shouted, “Oh, my God, they’re killing themselves!” In *The Davidian Massacre*, Carol Moore commented, “As if only a Davidian mass suicide could explain the fire.”

## **Reactions to the Waco Tragedy**

Last fall, my wife and I visited the Davidian compound, a few miles outside Waco, Texas, where some members of the religious sect still live. The gate was open, and we drove a short distance inside to where a monument had been erected in honor of the Branch Davidians who died there. It is a simple memorial, mostly just listing the names of the slain. I was struck by the large number of children who died in the fire, as they had inscribed their ages along with their names.

It saddened me that this could happen in my country. At the time, many Americans were enraged, and directed their anger at the Clinton administration, including Attorney General Janet Reno. It is likely that the tragedy contributed to the Republicans taking control of both houses of Congress the next November.

Unfortunately, some saw the tragic events at Waco, from February 28 to April 19, 1993, as something that called for a violent reaction against the federal government in general. Federal prosecutors alleged during the trial of Timothy McVeigh that he was motivated to bomb the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building because of his anger over the Waco incident. Considering Ricks’ connection to the Waco episode, this raises some interesting points. By the time of the Murrah bombing in 1995, Ricks was the lead agent in Oklahoma City for the FBI. Ricks was the very public spokesman for the FBI at Waco, the agent repeatedly seen on television.



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When the Murrah Federal Building was destroyed on April 19, 1995, two years to the day after the Branch Davidian fire, the FBI's office, led by Ricks at the time, was located at 50 Penn Place — six miles from the bombing. That office was quickly cleared. In my interview with him, Ricks declined to speculate as to whether he believed McVeigh targeted a federal building in Oklahoma specifically because of Ricks' role at Waco.

Since it is widely assumed that the Oklahoma City Bombing was intended to avenge Waco, I asked Ricks what lessons we could learn from the Waco debacle so as to prevent retaliations such as the Murrah building bombing. He didn't think anything could be learned. When I suggested that perhaps the ATF gloating over its assault by raising the ATF flag over the rubble of the Waco complex could have been the final straw that would send an irrational person such as McVeigh over the edge, Ricks sharply rejected that theory. He told me that McVeigh was "bound to blow up something," regardless of what was done at Waco.

In fact, Ricks expressed empathy for those who mounted the flag because they had been "shot at" during the initial ATF raid. He then asked me if I had ever been "shot at" during a battle, adding quickly that he had been "shot at."

After the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building on April 19, 1995, the FBI agent in charge of its investigation was Bob Ricks.

Moore concluded *The Davidian Massacre* by calling for a special independent counsel to investigate what she called "the crimes against the Branch Davidians by BATF and FBI agents and officials." Sadly, McVeigh's evil actions in April 1995 not only killed scores of innocent Americans, they also killed any chance of the investigation happening. After the Murrah bombing, some took the warped view that McVeigh's actions, two years later, had somehow justified the government's actions at Waco.

Although Congress never did an investigation of the Waco tragedy of a quarter century ago, it is an event that we should never forget. We should remember the next time a high-ranking government official spouts the official explanation for some tragic event in which the government was directly involved that this same government was anything but honest, forthright, and unsullied in its activities at Waco, and after.

*Photo: AP Images*



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