

Examining the Branch Davidian Siege in Three Keys: Event, Experience, and Myth



Waco, the Big Lie (Postcard calling for an investigation into the FBI)¹

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¹ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Kirk D. Lyons collections, Accession #3671, Box #9, Folder #5, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Introduction

Because of the promises held within the First Amendment, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,”² tensions have, and continue to, exist between religious minorities and the US Government. An extremist version of Protestant Christianity has never possessed an overwhelming influence in the day-to-day lives of U.S. citizens. Nonetheless, mainline Protestantism has influenced governmental policy and tried to suppress minority faiths since the birth of the United States, minor Protestant sects, and non-Christians alike.

In the nineteenth century, Mormons and other minority religious groups found themselves under the microscope of government scrutiny. Mormon founder Joseph Smith introduced a New Testament of Jesus Christ and embraced a dogma that condoned polygamy. State authorities in Missouri pursued Smith with legal action, and Smith, in turn, established a Mormon community, the Kingdom of Nauvoo in Illinois, on the banks of the Mississippi River. Smith and his followers tried to maintain a peaceful existence in Illinois, but tension between Nauvoo and state authorities continued to rise. Authorities feared that Smith intended to cause an armed insurrection; in turn, they jailed Joseph and his brother Hyrum in Carthage, Illinois. On June 27, 1844, a lynch mob stormed the jail and killed the Smith brothers. The Mormons, now under the leadership of Brigham Young, migrated to the Great Desert Basin (Utah) outside of United States’ hegemony. Tensions continued to exist between the Mormons and the US government; President Buchanan sent troops to Utah Territory in 1853 to quell what he believed to be ‘Mormon Rebellion.’³ Despite their isolation in the Great Desert Basin, the government

² U.S. Const. Amend. I.

³ Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020), 274.

still perceived the Mormons as a threat and anathema to American ideals. The Mormons faced scrutiny and Othering in the nineteenth century; yet the trend of discriminating against religious minorities, citizen and immigrant alike, continues to the present day.

Governmental scrutiny towards select religious minorities grew steadily from the origins of the Mormons throughout the twentieth century. However, the growth of mass media brought attention to this scrutiny to the forefront of the American psyche. On the morning of February 28, 1993, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), with embedded news media, acted upon a search warrant to arrest David Koresh and examine the Branch Davidian home, Mount Carmel, for illegal weapons and explosives. A gunfight soon ensued, resulting in the deaths of four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians.⁴ On the afternoon of February 28, after a ceasefire, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) relieved the ATF of duty and assumed operations at Mount Carmel, thus beginning a 51-day siege.

The Branch Davidians represent one of numerous nontraditional religious movements targeted by Western Governments in the late twentieth century. In the monograph *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities*, Stuart A. Wright and Susan J. Palmer compiled the data for government raids on minority religious communities that were conducted by Western Governments. Between 1944 and 2015, Western Governments performed 121 raids on nontraditional religious movements. The French and US Governments conducted 63 of the raids.⁵ Government-sponsored raids on nontraditional religious movements steadily increased from the 1940s to the 1980s, and then spiked in the 1990s, with some decline in the 2000s. The Branch Davidians became a part of a larger trend of focus upon internal threats that occurred

⁴ Stuart A. Wright and Susan J. Palmer, *Storming Zion: Government Raids on Religious Communities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 100.

⁵ Wright and Palmer, *Storming Zion*, 7.

within the decade between the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the Terror Attacks of September 11, 2001, that began the Global War on Terrorism. In a decade with diminished international threats, the government and media found appeal amongst the general public by focusing on domestic religious minorities, militia, and other groups with extreme political opinions.

When the tensions that occur between government and religious minorities come to direct conflict, a binary narrative of us versus them tends to arise during, and immediately after, the conflict has concluded. However, the binary narrative of one side in the right and one side in the wrong ignores nuances. Despite the earliest narratives of the Branch Davidian siege, the government did not act solely with good intentions and the Branch Davidians did not pursue a mass suicide conclusion to their lives. The Branch Davidian siege and its aftermath need a multipronged approach of examination to provide a holistic narrative.

Fortunately, one historian, Paul Cohen, in the monograph *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth*, created a triptych methodology for engaging with historical events that possess vast grey areas. Cohen crafted his methodology using late nineteenth-century China for his case study. His work created a map for understanding numerous historical situations with greater nuance than merely engaging with the existing binary narrative.⁶ By examining the lead-up to the Mount Carmel incident of April 19, 1993, through the lenses of event, experience, and myth, a greater understanding of Branch Davidians and their impact upon greater American Culture will be established. While the government portrayed thrightsidians as a cult movement, akin to Jim Jones, the leader of The Peoples Temple from 1955-1978, the Branch

⁶ Cohen's uses of event, experience and myth is expanded up in the methods section of this paper.

Davidians understood themselves within the context of Protestant millennial movements, and extreme political right groups later saw them as heroic defenders against government overreach.

Background

Popular history has limited the narrative of the Branch Davidians to a scope of the mid-1980s, until the climax of the Mount Carmel siege, and focused upon the Branch Davidians as a cult rather than a Millenarist Christian sect. This narrow focus obscures the foundations of the sect within the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDAC) and the battles over differing hermeneutical approaches that led to the rise of David Koresh. The Branch Davidians split from the Davidians in 1955, 30 years after the Davidians separated from the mainline SDAC. Like the SDAC, Davidians and Branch Davidians embrace a strong affinity towards eschatology. Leaders within the SDAC in the mid-nineteenth century, through Koresh, prophesied about a near future of the apocalypse, the second coming of Christ, and other events foretold in the Book of Revelation.

In 1929, Seventh-day Adventist Victor T. Houteff began writing *The Shepherd's Rod* booklet series as a stark criticism of SDAC leadership accepting secular notions and as a means to explain chapter 7 of the Book of Revelation (King James Version Bible). In the preface of *The Shepherd's Rod Volume 1*, Houteff writes, "It is the intention of this book to reveal the truth of the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7, but the chief object of this publication is to bring about a reformation among God's people. ... This subject is made clear by the use of the Bible and the writings given by the Spirit of Prophecy."⁷ Houteff gained a small following within the ranks of SDAC. However, rather than accept criticism, SDAC leadership exiled Houteff. In 1935, Houteff, with a small following of former SDAC members, moved to the outskirts of Waco,

⁷ Victor T. Houteff, *The Shepherds Rod: The 144,000 – A Call of Reformation Volume 1* (Waco: The Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Association, 1930), 4. <https://gadsda.com/shepherds-rod-volume-one/>.

Texas, and purchased land, thus establishing Mount Carmel as the Davidian home. Houteff evangelized and grew the Davidians, spreading his ecclesiological thought to England, India, Australia, and the West Indies.⁸ Houteff's leadership of the Davidians lasted until his death in 1955; at this time, a fissure grew within the sect.

Houteff's wife, Florence Houteff, and Benjamin Roden both vied for the role of leadership. Roden gained support, but Florence maintained the role of leader until 1959. Roden split from the Davidians, believing that God had chosen him to continue Victor Houteff's work. Roden then established the Branch Davidians from his interpretation of the biblical passage, "and a branch shall grow out of his roots."⁹ Despite the challenge from Roden, Florence successfully guided the Davidians in the immediate wake of her husband's death, but her attempt at turning her husband's teachings into prophecy prematurely set an end date to her time as leader. In the article "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians," Sarah Harvey writes, "Florence predicted, based on her interpretation of Victor's teachings, that God would 'violently chastise the Seventh-day Adventists who did not accept the Davidian message, and then Davidians would be relocated miraculously to God's kingdom in the Holy Land.' She predicted that this would occur 'on or about' 22 April 1959."¹⁰ Davidian membership surged until the date of Florence's prophecy. However, when Florence's predictions failed to come to fruition, Davidian membership tapered, and Florence left Waco. Benjamin Roden then engaged in a 14-year legal battle to become the legitimate owner of Mount Carmel, succeeding in 1973. Benjamin Roden maintained leadership of the Branch Davidians until his death in 1978; at this time, his wife Lois and son George

⁸ Eugene V. Gallagher, "Davidians and Branch Davidians (1929-1981)," *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, August 3, 2013, <https://wrlldrels.org/2016/10/08/davidians-and-branch-davidians/>.

⁹ Isaiah 11:1 (King James Version Bible)

¹⁰ Sarah Harvey, "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians," *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*, eds. James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart, January 15, 2021, www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians.

contested each other over the future leadership of the Branch Davidians.

The rivalry between mother and son did not quell the growth of the Branch Davidians. The majority of Branch Davidians recognized Lois as maintaining the “Spirit of Prophecy,”¹¹ as she wrote about feminine aspects of the divine and the role of female leadership within theology in her journal *SHEkinah*.¹² George maintained that he should lead the Branch Davidians, yet did not directly challenge his mother in the late 1970s or early 1980s. However, over the course of the early 1980s, Lois’s influence waned as David Koresh (then known by his birth name Vernon Howell) became a Branch Davidian member. The SDAC exiled Koresh in 1981 for preaching his own hermeneutical version of SDAC theology.¹³ Lois initially felt favorably towards Koresh and tapped him to be her successor. Yet, within two years, Koresh usurped Lois as leader when he refused to publish an edition of *SHEkinah* in 1983; at this time, Branch Davidians within Mount Carmel recognized that God had moved the Spirit of Prophecy from Lois to Koresh.¹⁴ Koresh had ascended to the role of leadership, but George Roden and his faction of Branch Davidians continued to vie for control of Mount Carmel.

George achieved short-term victory in 1984, when Koresh and his devout followers left Mount Carmel to evangelize in England, Australia, Israel, and cities across the US. However, the contention between George and Koresh resumed in 1987, with exchanges of gunfire as Koresh had returned to reclaim Mount Carmel. Following the gunfight, prosecutors in Waco charged all parties involved in the hostilities. Koresh retained his freedom, via a hung jury, and his followers

¹¹ Harvey, "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians."

¹² Lois Roden likely chose the name *SHEkinah* for her journal due to the role of women in ancient Jewish Society. “*Kinah*” is the plural form of “*Kinor*” and is derived from the Hebrew Language. Both words refer to traditional Jewish eulogies that happen in both song and poem performed by female professional mourners. Richard Gottheil and Max Schloessinger, “*Kinah*,” *Jewish Encyclopedia: The unedited full-text of the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia*, <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9322-kinah#anchor3>.

¹³ Harvey, "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians."

¹⁴ Harvey, "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians."

received acquittals. George escaped a guilty verdict over the gunfight but was subsequently found guilty and imprisoned on a different charge in 1988.¹⁵ From 1988 until fire engulfed Mount Carmel on April 19, 1993, Koresh spread his prophecies, evangelized, and led the Branch Davidians. All while loyalists to the Roden family plotted and looked on with dismay.

Methodology

Before engaging with the Davidian siege through the lenses of Event, Experience, and Myth, it is necessary to establish an understanding of how Cohen applied the three keys to his own work. In *History in Three Keys*, Cohen analyzed the Boxer Rebellion through three perspectives. The perspective of Event represents the traditional narratives, crafted by historians, through primary source material across the school of historical thought. The perspective of Experience relies upon conveying an understanding of the environs that affected the people living through a specific event, such as the drought conditions in China at the time of the Rebellion and the existing tensions between locals and Christian missionaries. The perspective of Myth evaluates the impressions of the past onto the present, as in how the past is used to shape meta-narratives and influence popular culture.¹⁶ By juxtaposing the keys of Cohen's triptych methodology, the original binary narrative crafted from occurrences will give way to a nuanced perception of events. Cohen took a non-watershed occurrence, the Boxer Rebellion, and created a holistic narrative. Likewise, applying the keys to the Branch Davidians creates an opportunity to fully extract the past. Cohen writes, "*Event, experience, and myth* point different ways of getting at the meaning of the past, of accessing it, and ultimately knowing it. But they also suggest different ways in which the past may be configured or shaped, each operating according

¹⁵ Harvey, "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians."

¹⁶ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), xiii-xv.

to different principles and imparting a very different inflection or ‘tone.’”¹⁷ By using each aspect of a historical event, like the Branch Davidian siege, the tone creates a synergy. This synergy of perspectives increases the understanding of an occurrence that is lacking when viewed through only one lens or when the occurrence has become distorted through its use in a modern meta-narrative.

Event

In *History in Three Keys*, Cohen highlights how traditional primary source material, like government records, soldier diaries, etc., conveys how the event of the Boxer Rebellion unfolded. Scholars use traditional primary source material to reconstruct events. Cohen writes, “The process of historical reconstruction generally takes as its point of departure a known outcome and then attempts an explanation of how this outcome was brought about. Thus, although the product of the historian’s efforts, the history he or she writes, customarily begins at some point in the past and moves forward...”¹⁸ In the case of the Branch Davidian standoff, typical governmental materials crafted the initial narrative of the event, such as negotiation recordings, affidavits for search warrants, and congressional testimony. However, unlike Cohen’s case study of the Boxers and other historical events before visual news media, mass news media subjected the Davidian siege to relentless news coverage. In the era of 24-hour news coverage, the greater public receives information in real time. Mass news media allowed for the construction of the Branch Davidian narrative in real time, thus creating pre-established biases for scholars looking back.

The siege of the Branch Davidian home of Mount Carmel displayed the power of real-time media coverage to convey a narrative to the public at large. For 51 days, from February 28

¹⁷ Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 289.

¹⁸ Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 7.

to April 19, 1993, the government's perspective of the Branch Davidian siege controlled the 24-hour news cycle. During this time, the news media crafted a narrative that the Branch Davidians resembled a suicide cult, akin to Jim Jones' Peoples' Temple in 1978. This narrative gained traction and spread. In *Storming Zion*, Wright and Palmer examined how disenfranchised Branch Davidians, those with loyalties to the Roden family, helped to cultivate the cult narrative along with other allegations against Koresh. Wright and Palmer argue,

By casting the Davidians as a "dangerous cult," opponents gained a distinct advantage in their moral campaign to assail Koresh and mobilize state control actions...The uncritical acceptance of this narrative was made clear in the days and weeks following the ATF raid on Mount Carmel, in which the Davidians were routinely referred to as a dangerous cult in news reports and by government spokespersons in...the unchallenged cult framing of the group by the organized oppositional network contributed to an exaggerated threat which was, in turn, used by state actors to justify the deadly paramilitary raid in order to serve the warrants.¹⁹

Without a mix of true, embellished, and false information provided by disenfranchised Branch Davidians, the media would have lacked the material to build support around the ATF's case to investigate Mount Carmel. By crafting a public perception of the Branch Davidians as a



¹⁹ Wright and Palmer, "The Branch Davidians," in *Storming Zion*, 114.

dangerous cult, the media actively distributed malicious propaganda that built support for the government's case against the Branch Davidians.

Law Enforcement Supporters Present at Mount Carmel²⁰

From February 28 until the end of the siege, the press presented the story of the raid and standoff to the American public. The press broadcast numerous images from the Branch Davidian home, including the ATF climbing to the second-floor windows of Mount Carmel, the encirclement of FBI agents, and the climactic inferno. The blind support, built by the media, allowed the government to escalate with acts of misfeasance over the course of the siege. FBI agents on the ground embraced the notion that the Branch Davidians wanted to achieve martyrdom through mass suicide.

During the siege, media and FBI agents present at Mount Carmel accepted the notion of a mass suicide cult. 17 years after the last embers of the fire smoldered, and contrary to new evidence, some officials, like retired FBI negotiator Gary Noesner, still accepted that Koresh was hellbent on bringing about a mass suicide event. In the memoir *Stalling for Time: My Life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator*, Noesner writes, "My own view is that Koresh was still ambivalent. Part of him wanted to live, and part of him was attracted to martyrdom. Despite his attorneys' efforts to convince him otherwise, he must have known that he was unlikely to avoid the death penalty for killing the ATF agents. This knowledge may have set the stage for the mass suicide he seemed to be planning."²¹ Agent Noesner recounts a version of events that placed the Branch Davidians on a path towards suicide 17 years after the fact. Over the course of the negotiations, Agent Noesner constantly tried to convince his superiors that Koresh planned to exit Mount

²⁰ George Widman, AP Photo, "ATF Raid on Waco Branch Davidians 20th Anniversary," *ABC News*, 2013. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/slideshow/atf-raid-waco-branch-davidians-20th-anniversary-18592881/image-18593190>.

²¹ Gary Noesner, "Negotiating with the Sinful Messiah," in *Stalling for Time: My Life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator* (New York: Random House, 2010), 128-129.

Carmel without incident, if he could first transcribe his biblical message. On April 14, Koresh conveyed to negotiators that he would exit Mount Carmel after transcribing his interpretation of the Seven Seals. Agent Noesner and members of HRT perceived this as a stall tactic on Koresh's behalf. Yet, in a letter addressed to one of his attorneys, Richard "Dick" DeGuerin, on April 14, Koresh expressed his desire to end the siege peacefully. Koresh writes, "I will demand the first manuscript of the Seals be given to you. Many scholars and religious leaders will wish to have copies for examination. I will keep a copy with me. As soon as I can see that people, like Jim Tabor and Phil Arnold have a copy. I will come out and then you can do your thing with this Beast...The Seven Seals, in written form are the most sacred information ever!"²² Due to the aggression of the HRT, Koresh's true intentions, stalling for time or genuinely willing to exit Mount Carmel upon completion of his transcription, remain an unknown. The letter to attorney DeGuerin indicates excitement on Koresh's part and a perception that divine intervention was ushering in a calm end to the siege. Yet, the FBI denigrated Koresh's beliefs and proceeded with further escalation.

Ignoring Koresh's ecclesiastical worldview demonstrated the FBI's folly. In the essay "Religious Discourse and Failed Negotiations," James D. Tabor examines the idiosyncrasies of Koresh's worldview and how the FBI missed opportunities to work within that worldview. Tabor writes, "It is not an unreasonable assertion to suggest that effective communication with David Koresh would have required knowledge of the biblically based, apocalyptic world he inhabited. ...The dynamics of apocalypticism allow for considerable flexibility and variation...Yet to the FBI in 1993, the outcome of the Waco standoff was inevitable, predetermined by Koresh's

²² [Waco] Branch Davidians: Amo Paul Roden papers, Accession #3312, Box #1, Folder #1, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

beliefs...Koresh was reduced to a stereotype, a tabloid persona bent on self-destruction.”²³ Faiths that adhere to apocalypticism, like the Branch Davidians and SDAC, need flexibility and variation to survive when the prophesies of their leaders fail to come to fruition. Despite this, the government initially built its case against Koresh, based partially on statements by former Branch Davidians and Roden family loyalists. The government missed the opportunity to completely understand Koresh and his following. In the commentary, “David’s Promise to ‘Come Out’ and The Evidence of the Manuscript,” to Koresh’s translation of the Seven Seals, religious studies scholars James D Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold examine Koresh’s commitment to maintain his promise to leave Mount Carmel and surrender. Tabor and Arnold write,

We know that the first chapter of this work was completed on Sunday evening, the night before the fire and was typed onto a computer disk by Ruth Riddle. This disk survived the fire, carried out by Ruth Riddle...The existence of the manuscript itself, as well as internal evidence within the text, confirm that David was keeping his promise to produce an interpretive document. Such evidence also supports the view that David actually intended to lead his group out peacefully.²⁴

Koresh had contact with Tabor and Arnold during the siege. They gave advice to the FBI, but rather than fully enlisting the help of theologians, well-versed in Koresh’s version of Millennialism, FBI leaders chose escalation.

In the aftermath of the ATF’s failed attempt to execute its search warrant for illegal firearms and explosives on Koresh and Mount Carmel, the FBI took charge of the situation by deploying negotiators and the elite Hostage Rescue Team (HRT). In an October 8, 1993, report to Deputy Attorney General (DAG) Philip Heyman, Scruggs et al. write, “The FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team is a dedicated 50-man counterterrorist unit with responsibility for high-threat

²³ James D. Tabor, “Religious Discourse and Failed Negotiations,” in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspective on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 278-279.

²⁴ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Amo Paul Roden papers, Accession #3312, Box #1, Folder #1, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

tactical missions...The HRT's capabilities exceeds those of the FBI's SWAT teams... The HRT has deployed in a number of high-threat tactical operations, both domestically and overseas...HRT members receive training in maritime operations from the U.S. Navy Seals.”²⁵ When the ATF botched the initial search warrant raid, the FBI took charge and began to escalate the situation. With its training and missions both foreign and domestic, the HRT represents the law enforcement equivalent of military Special Forces. From February 28 onward, negotiators took notice of FBI leadership’s preferred methods to end the siege. Agent Noesner received his orders to deploy to Waco on February 28, at the same time as HRT commander Dick Rogers. Agent Noesner writes in his memoir, “I saw two FBI planes, one large and one small. I stood on the tarmac and watched as Dick Rogers, along with other senior FBI And ATF officials, boarded the larger one, an executive jet. I boarded the much slower propeller plane to which I was assigned.”²⁶ By placing Agent Noesner on a slower means of transport than the leader of the HRT, the FBI demonstrated from day one their desire for the conduct of the siege. Agent Noesner and other negotiators made missteps in their conversations with Koresh. However, the decisions to lead with the HRT did not set the FBI up for success.

To the chagrin of negotiators, the HRT escalated its tactics throughout the 51-day siege via destruction of property and implementation of psychological operations (PSYOPS). The HRT employed the destruction of property and PSYOPS as a means to stress Koresh and his followers out of Mount Carmel. These tactics failed to produce the HRT’s desired outcome and hindered the ability to converse with Koresh and other Branch Davidians in a rational manner. Agent Noesner described how the incidence of HRT escalation harmed communications between

²⁵ Richard Scruggs et al, “Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco, Texas: February 28 to April 19, 1993,” *Department of Justice Archives*, October 8, 1993, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/publications/waco/report-deputy-attorney-general-events-waco-texas>.

²⁶ Noesner, “Negotiating with the Sinful Messiah,” 94.

negotiators and Koresh on March 2. “Despite my warning, Jamar ordered the armored Bradley vehicles to move onto Davidian property as a visible display of the FBI’s power. I was concerned that this would only ratchet up the tension and damage our credibility. That proved true in our next conversation with Schneider: he angrily denounced us for moving the armored vehicles forward.”²⁷ Escalation worked against the goals of the HRT; yet, escalation continued to supersede negotiations in the priorities of FBI leadership. The HRT crushed classic cars on the grounds of Mount Carmel, cut electricity to the building, blasted obnoxious music and animal sounds, and in the end, inserted CS gas into the building.

Despite taking actions that would be considered war crimes, had the US military done the same to foreign adversaries, internal reports, such as Scruggs et al., and independent reports, such as former Assistant Attorney General (AAG) Edward Dennis Jr. (1988-1990), supported the actions of the FBI. Scruggs et al. states, “The events at the Branch Davidian compound outside Waco, Texas were exceptional and required an-exceptional response by law enforcement. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of law enforcement, the incident also had an exceptionally tragic ending.”²⁸ AAG Dennis’s October 1993 report “Evaluation of the Handling of the Branch Davidian Stand-Off in Waco” states, “I conclude that the events of April 19 were the result of David Koresh's determined efforts to choreograph his own death and the deaths of his followers in a confrontation with federal authorities to fulfill Koresh's apocalyptic prophesy. The deaths of Koresh, his followers, and their children on April 19th were not the result of a flaw in the gas plan or the negotiation strategy.”²⁹ Both reports attempted to diminish the mistakes made by the

²⁷ Noesner, “Negotiating with the Sinful Messiah,” 110-111.

²⁸ Scruggs et al., “Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco.”

²⁹ Edward S. G. Dennis Jr., “Evaluation of the Handling of the Branch Davidian Stand-Off in Waco, Texas February 28 to April 19, 1993,” *U.S. Department of Justice*, October 8, 1993, <https://www.justice.gov/archives/publications/waco/evaluation-handling-branch-davidian-stand-waco-texas-february-28-april-19-1993>.

government, including reducing the tensions between the HTR and negotiators. The immediate perception of the Mount Carmel siege presented the government as the de facto ‘good guys’ and the Branch Davidians as the ‘crazed cultists.’ The media and government officials both pushed this narrative. However, the congressional power shift of the 1994 midterm elections created a desire to reevaluate the standoff.

Viewing the Mount Carmel siege through the Key of Event, demonstrates a multifaceted environment. The media enabled the spread of the cult narrative. Tensions existed within the FBI between negotiators and the HRT. When the siege came to a calamitous end, the government carefully crafted its narrative to blame the massive loss of life on the Branch Davidians. ATF, FBI, and Department of Justice (DOJ) officials presented narratives meant to diminish the faults of the government in the immediate aftermath. However, the 1994 midterm elections switched the makeup of Congress from one favorable to the Clinton administration, to one starkly opposed. Prior to the 1994 midterm elections, reports such as Scruggs et al and Dennis Jr., favored the government’s official account of events. In the wake of 1994 elections, the House of Representatives, under the leadership of Speaker Newt Gingrich, began a series of investigations lead by the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight. The committee focused on the Mount Carmel tragedy in numerous reports, finding numerous mistakes on the part of law enforcement and the media.

In House Report 104-749, the Committee addresses the media’s role and states, “On the one hand, it seemed clear enough that a Jonestown-like religious cult led by an irrational leader had brought disaster on itself. On the other hand, images of the tanks and other military vehicles gave the impression that the FBI was using excessive force together with military weapons and

tactics against U.S. citizens, contrary to our civilian law enforcement tradition.”³⁰ The in the moment narrative worked in the government’s favor. Yet, the sight of military vehicles surrounding a building filled with US civilians created cognitive dissonance amongst the public. The committee placed the ultimate blame for death on Koresh but condemned the DOJ and FBI for its actions on April 19. The report states, “The CS riot control agent assault of April 19 should not have taken place. The possibility of a negotiated end to the standoff presented by Koresh should have been pursued even if it had taken several more weeks...The FBI should have sought and accepted more expert advice on the Branch Davidians and their religious views and been more open-minded to the advice of the FBI’s own experts.”³¹ The committee agreed that more consultation should have taken place with religious leaders and that the FBI overstepped its role. The committee took the known outcome of the disaster of April 19 and reconstructed the event. Yet, further reconstruction of the Mount Carmel siege event continues with modern scholarship. Still, reconstructing an event does not grant a holistic view of all that has transpired. However, an understanding of the Experience adds an additional layer of depth to an historical occurrence.

Experience

An old aphorism, falsely accredited to Winston Churchill, states, “History is Written by the Victors.”³² In the case of the Branch Davidians, this aphorism rang true for years. One side, the government, co-opted the narrative from the beginning. The other side, the Branch Davidians, felt diminished and robbed of their agency in the aftermath of the siege. The narrative

³⁰ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, *Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Towards the Branch Davidians: Thirteenth Report*, 104th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1996, H. Rep, 104-749, 7, <https://www.congress.gov/104/crpt/hrpt749/CRPT-104hrpt749.pdf>.

³¹ U.S. Congress, House, H. Rep, 104-749, 4.

³² Matthew Phelan, “The History of ‘History Is Written by the Victors’,” *Slate*, November 26, 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/11/history-is-written-by-the-victors-quote-origin.html>.

of the Branch Davidians has slowly expanded to include the experiences of members present during the siege. Numerous documentaries and TV specials now recount the events of 1993 in a dual fashion, granting agency to both government agents and the Branch Davidians. These include William Gazecki's 1997 *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, Jason Van Vleet's 2000 *Waco: A New Revelation*, A&E's 2018 *Waco: Madman or Messiah*, and Paramount Network's 2018 *Waco* (based on David Thibodeau's autobiography, *Waco a Survivor's Story*). Records obtained from the government through the Freedom of Information Act and via accessing Davidian donations to Baylor University's special archive, the Texas Collection, has granted film makers and scholars alike the opportunity to present the Branch Davidian account of the siege.

However, writing about experience creates the problem of replication taking place instead of a pure account; the ability to view an occurrence, like the Branch Davidian siege, through the environs and emotional states of people, conveys a richer narrative than the writings of an event alone. Cohen writes, "Recovery of the experienced past in a literal sense is...not possible. One reason for this is that in any historical situation only a small fragment of the totality of people's experiences is ever recorded for posterity...The best that a participant account can do is provide a vivid and compelling sense of what the past was like. It cannot give us the past."³³ While the individual participants of a historical occurrence may have left few written records, their experience can be translated through other means. In the case of the Branch Davidians, a sample of materials used to extrapolate their experience comes from sermons, poetry, oral history, and outside advocacy during the event, such as, the testimony of Koresh's mother.

On the evening of February 28, while the other Branch Davidians tended wounds and mourned the dead, Koresh, suffering from a gunshot wound, wrote the sermon "The Coming of

³³ Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 59.

the End of the World.” Koresh crafted the sermon to serve a dual purpose, to argue for the fulfillment of his prophetic visions and to ease the feelings of his followers. The sermon states, “When the truth comes, and we deny it, that’s when we’re under condemnation, that’s where we are now. It’s God’s words, all I am in the voice. Any man that stood up and said that he is a witness for Christ and has not known the Seven Seals, is false. That’s what God has put on record, they just don’t want to hear the truth. They virtually deny the book of Revelation.”³⁴ Koresh previously predicted that the Branch Davidians would be challenged. The phrase “under condemnation” supported his vision and conveyed a message of a Godly test to Koresh’s followers. The sermon continues, “The Devil doesn’t care what you believe, as long as you’re not in line with the thought of God. When the truth comes, and we deny it, that’s when were under condemnation, that’s where we are now. Its God’s words, all I am is the voice. Any man that stood up and said that he is a witness for Christ and has not know the Seven Seals, is False.”³⁵ Koresh’s ability to interpret the Seven Seals, using his esoteric knowledge of the Book of Revelation, appealed to other Branch Davidians. Reminding the other members within Mount Carmel of that knowledge, in the aftermath of the ATF assault, eased minds and readied Koresh’s followers for the long siege.

Since the end of the siege, nearly 30 years ago, documentarians and scholars have produced quality work about the Branch Davidian-FBI standoff. Nonetheless, the products of documentarians and scholars pale in comparison to the words of the Branch Davidians that survived the siege, some written in the moment of surrender to the FBI and others recorded years later as oral history. One such experience comes from siege survivor David Thibodeau.

³⁴ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #1, Folder #22, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

³⁵ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #1, Folder #22, The Texas Collection.

Thibodeau escaped from Mount Carmel during the inferno on April 19, 1993, and turned his experiences into the autobiography, *Waco: A Survivor's Story*. Within his autobiography, Thibodeau states, “During the second half of 1992 ominous portent were gathering in the air around Mount Carmel...Some, powerful, unseen force generated by fate seemed to drive our story to the cataclysmic conclusion foretold in Revelation. ‘What are you going to do six months from now when this is all surrounded with tanks,’ David said...”³⁶ Thibodeau felt Koresh’s prophetic vision, before the ATF’s assault, came to fruition. Coincidentally, Koresh asked his foreboding question around the time the government botched its attempt to end the 1992 Ruby Ridge standoff peacefully.

The media’s recordings of the ATF scaling to the second-floor windows of Mount Carmel are well known. However, Thibodeau’s remembrance of that day adds new layers of thought. Thibodeau vividly remembers the day Koresh’s prediction came to fruition on February 28. Thibodeau writes, “A team of agents with automatic weapons scaled the chapel roof...Climbing twenty-foot aluminum ladders, they smashed the windows...and tossed in their flash-bang grenades. These grenades explode with a blinding light and a terrific racket; they can mutilate an unprotected person. As the glass broke, however someone in the room...started firing.”³⁷ Thibodeau, and other Branch Davidians, witnessed incoming flash-bang grenades and men dressed for war. Fear and anxiety filled Mount Carmel. Thibodeau continues, “I saw an armed, black-suited figure coming toward me and thought, ‘this guy is going to come in her and kill me.’”³⁸ Traditional narratives based on the event alone, find difficulty in expressing the feeling of “I’m going to die” from government reports and biased media reporting. Yet, material

³⁶ David Thibodeau, *Waco: A Survivor's Story* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2018), 129.

³⁷ Thibodeau, *Waco*, 163.

³⁸ Thibodeau, 165.

like Thibodeau's personal account and other siege survivors conveys the direst thoughts of a people experiencing tragedy. Thibodeau's memories continue to reveal the depths of the siege until the inferno.

Government records and statements from FBI agents provide justifications and the feelings on the ground when PSYOPS commenced. Although, reports cannot express the feeling of being on the receiving end of PSYOPS the way that a survivor can. Thibodeau describes his memory from the nights that FBI directed psychological operations at the Davidian home:

It is hell. Day and night booming speakers blast us with wild sounds—blaring sirens, shrieking seagulls, howling coyotes, wailing bagpipes, crying babies, the screams of strangled rabbits... The cacophony of speeding trains and overring helicopters alternates with amplified recordings of Christmas carols, Islamic prayer calls, Buddhist chants, and repeated renderings of whiny Alice Cooper... Through the night the glare of brilliant stadium lights turns our property into a giant fishbowl. The young children and babies in our care, most under eight years old, are terrified.³⁹

Thibodeau's narrative captures the horrors brought upon the Branch Davidians by the FBI. Thibodeau's reflections in his autobiography represent reflections and long-term memory from the days of the siege. While long-term memory demonstrates its ability to fully express the emotion of an incident of trauma, experience needs representation from in the moment thoughts.

Poems and other writings from the Branch Davidians during and immediately after the siege grant this representation to the key of Experience. On March 21, Gladys Ottman and seven other Davidians left Mount Carmel and surrendered to the FBI. After their surrender, the FBI transferred custody of Ottman and the other Branch Davidians to the McLennan County Jail. During her time in jail, Ottman drafted poems about her experience during the siege. In the poem "Coming Out," Ottman writes, "I clutched by Bible in my arms and a few personal cosmetics in a bag,... As I trustingly left my loved ones, And headed into the world, The shock and surprise

³⁹ Thibodeau, *Waco*, vii.

that came to me, As I made my way through the mud, ‘STOP RIGHT THERE’, ‘NOW DROP YOUR BAGS’, AND RAISE YOUR ARMS IN THE AIR’, After being checked over, my hands were tied behind my back, in white plastic cuffs. Was that because I’d really done nothing wrong?”⁴⁰ Ottman’s poem captures a change in her attitude during the transition from grief of leaving loved ones behind to dismay at they treated bestowed by federal agents. Ottman continues, “So I climbed into the Bradley and right before my eyes, Were the words ‘Cannon’ and ‘Machine Gun’, So I know they really had lied. For ‘Armoured Personnel Carrier’ was what we were told them to be but it really was quite different As my open eyes could see.”⁴¹ Ottman’s perception of military vehicles reinforced the notion that the government had decided to engage in war with its own citizens. Ottman used her poetry to convey that the Davidian experience was like the persecution of Christ and the tribulations of Johan. Ottman conveys an experience that perceived the government as inciters of aggression against a pious group. Ottman, like a few other Branch Davidians, experienced the siege from within and lived to tell her narrative. Other Branch Davidians, such as Koresh’s mother Bonnie Clark Haldeman, watched from the outside as the sequence of the siege unfurled.

As one of the Branch Davidians outside of Mount Carmel during the events of the siege, Haldeman did not face prosecution like other adult survivors. Haldeman later provided an affidavit for attorney Richard E. Flamm’s brief of *Amicus Curiae* in October 1996. Flamm filed the brief in support of a Joint Petition for *Writ of Certiorari*, to aid the families of deceased Branch Davidians in their ongoing wrongful death suit against the government. Haldeman uses her affidavit to describe the Branch Davidian experience, while arguing against the government’s narrative.

⁴⁰ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #1, Folder #24, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

⁴¹ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #1, Folder #24.

From the author’s personal military experience: The Infantry variant of the Bradley Fighting Vehicle is considered an armored personal carrier, capable of seating six people in its cabin in addition to the driver and gunner.

Haldeman states, “We never heard the Church center called a compound until this tragedy. It was a religious center for worship, living, work, education, and recreation. It is outrageous and ridiculous, and certainly contemptuous, to call the center a fortress. It was church and home. To say the ‘fort style’ of the Church was a reflection of David’s apocalyptic mentality is not at all true.”⁴² Numerous Branch members perceived Koresh as a prophet and never thought of their home as a separatist stronghold. Aside from Koresh’s polygamy, Branch members experienced a life similar to that of a hippie commune. Haldeman continues, “The only reason for the existence of our Church was for religious purposes. Mt. Carmel was a place of Bible study and worship. A great part of each day was [spend] in Bible readings and discussions. It was for the purpose of studying the Bible that members came from many countries.”⁴³ Haldeman further attempts to highlight the positive aspects of the Branch experience, such as its multicultural and multinational intermingling. Additionally, she makes a point that the members sought to exercise their First Amendment rights. Working within First Amendment context, Haldeman strived to eliminate the notion of cult from the experience. Haldeman states, “We never considered ourselves a ‘cult.’ We understood this was a very negative term. We believed in the right of everyone to choose religion they believed in. Our faith was a subject of constant discussion and analysis. Our members were free to choose and exercise their religious faith. This created vital religious discussion.”⁴⁴ On one hand Haldeman, as the mother of Koresh, is biased, working to defend her son’s legacy and movement. However, she demonstrated a defense of her fellow Branch members beyond a mother taking her son’s side. The Branch Davidians experienced the scrutiny of a minority faith and faced backlash due to their leader’s actions.

⁴² [Waco] Branch Davidians: Kirk D. Lyons collections, Accession #3671, Box #1, Folder #1 The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

⁴³ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Kirk D. Lyons collections, Accession #3671, Box #1, Folder #1 .

⁴⁴ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Kirk D. Lyons collections, Accession #3671, Box #1, Folder #1 .

When tragedy removes the ability to create agency for oneself, other survivors, at times, grant agency to the fallen via markers. The marker pictured below pinpoints the locations on the Mount Carmel grounds where mothers and children took shelter during the FBI's CS gas insertion.



Marker indicating where Mothers and Children Perished⁴⁵

Their lives ended due to suffocation, as the as the inferno and CS gas made their breathing impossible. Markers such as this grant some agency to the deceased by allowing some symbiosis between the past and present. The Branch Davidians that perished inside the bunker lost their ability to fully convey their experience, but with the inclusion of markers, their experience reverberates to the present.

Small fragments of the in-the-moment experience, such as markers and poems, allow for a fuller understanding of the past and shows itself in the present. An entire reconstruction of the Branch Davidians, encompassing a full array of emotions and thoughts, remains beyond the ability of modern scholars. Still, the inclusion of small pieces of experience, can provide depth

⁴⁵ Aaron Wilson, "Marker indicating where Mothers and Children Perished," Personal Photo, June 9, 2022, Branch Davidian Compound, Waco, TX.

to historical occurrences. By coupling existing pieces of experience with the reconstructions of an event, a nuanced representation of the past presents itself. However, one dynamic aspect of the past, myth, needs inclusion to create a fully holistic perception.

Myth

The temporal distance between an event and modern day is the significant key to a historical myth. The construction of myth begins during a historical event. In the case of the Branch Davidian siege, the choices of the press play as much of a critical role in shaping the narrative as did the FBI and the Branch Davidians. Prior to the siege the Branch Davidians enjoyed mystique in their day-to-day interactions with other residents of Waco. However, thanks to choices made by the media, the Branch Davidian mystique quickly eroded over the course of 51 days. In the essay “Cops, News Copy, and Public Opinion: Legitimacy and the Social Construction of Evil in Waco,” sociologists Anson Shupe and Jeffry K. Hadden write, “Few Americans had ever heard of a sectarian group called the Branch Davidians until the last day of February in 1993. Fully 96 percent of the residents of the Waco area reported that they knew ‘little’ or nothing at all’ about the Branch Davidians prior to publicity surrounding the shoot-out.”⁴⁶ Over the course of the siege, the media provided consistent updates on the situation in Waco, a precursor to the media’s transition to overwhelming coverage two years later of the OJ Simpson murder trial. Members of the press embedded themselves in the Branch Davidian situation from the beginning, even riding along with ATF agents during the initial attempt to arrest Koresh on February 28. The media presence, coupled with their bias towards the

⁴⁶ Anson Shupe and Jeffry K. Hadden, “Cops, News Copy, and Public Opinion: Legitimacy and Social Construction of Evil in Waco,” in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspective on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 177.

government's version of events, negatively impacted the public's perception of the Branch Davidians. Shupe and Hadden continue, "Fifty-one days later, when the Mt. Carmel compound went up in flames, the Davidians were known to hundreds of millions around the world. Public opinion polls in the United States showed little sympathy for the Davidians and, in sharp contrast, substantial support for the actions of federal agents in handling the siege."⁴⁷ The mythology of a suicide cult grew with the media's initial coverage of the Mount Carmel siege. Koresh's own writings further cemented the notions of cult, like behavior in the government and greater public.

Near the end of the siege, on April 10 and 11, Koresh wrote two letters to the FBI and addressed them as friends. Koresh wrote from the vantage point of God and signed the letters using the Jewish sacred tetragram "Yahweh."⁴⁸ In the April 10 letter, Koresh writes, "You're not rejecting a man by fighting against David My servant, no, for I have given and revealed My Name to Him. Read Isaiah 45. The Name Koresh is My surname and all men are My Sons and the work of My hands... Learn from David My seals or, as you have said, bear the consequences."⁴⁹ Koresh's choice of language raised his notoriety. On one hand, it fed into the FBI's preconceived cult narrative, while on the other hand it established a larger-than-life persona to outlast his physical existence. Koresh's reference to the Book of Isaiah likely focused upon the first two passages. "Thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked

⁴⁷ Shupe and Hadden, "Cops, News Copy, and Publican Opinion," 177-178.

⁴⁸ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Amo Paul Roden papers, Accession #3312, Box #1, Folder #1, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

⁴⁹ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Amo Paul Roden papers, Accession #3312, Box #1, Folder #1.

places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron:”⁵⁰ In the tradition of the Masoretic Hebrew Bible (MHB), God anointed Cyrus (a royal Persian pagan) to vanquish the enemies of Israel and to rebuild Jerusalem. The MHB changed the pronunciation of the Persian Cyrus to the Hebrew Koresh.⁵¹ Koresh wrote the letter just a few days before he began his transcription of the Seven Seals, in an attempt to convey his desire to end the siege. He communicated that, of course, within the context of his own worldview.

From April 14 until the FBI inserted CS gas into the compound on the morning of April 19, Koresh dictated an introduction and a first chapter deciphering the first Seal. In attempting to transcribe the Seals, Koresh sought to impart the Branch Davidian mythos to the masses. Though, the actions of the FBI on April 19 prevented the full transcription from coming to fruition. Koresh’s transcripts showcase an attempt at furthering Branch mythology. Koresh comments after citing Jeremiah 23:5-8 and 18-20, “This beautiful prophecy, the Desire of the Ages, entails of Christ the Lord our Righteousness and also warns us of the latter days should we be found not standing in the counsel of the Lord. If we, the church of God, stand in the counsel of Christ, especially in the light of the seven seals, shall we not be a part of that beautiful bride spoken of in Jeremiah 33.”⁵² While communicating his translation of the first Seal, Koresh concurrently attempts to build the future mythology of the Branch. Asking his followers and future readers to stay, or come, to the Branch’s interpretation of Christianity. Koresh comments, following after citing Hosea 2:14-15, “The Christian Church being scattered from Jerusalem went throughout all nations. Being amongst Gentiles, the gospel was to impart unto the Gentiles the riches of God’s mercy. Here it is promised that once the unfaithful ones as Achan are taken

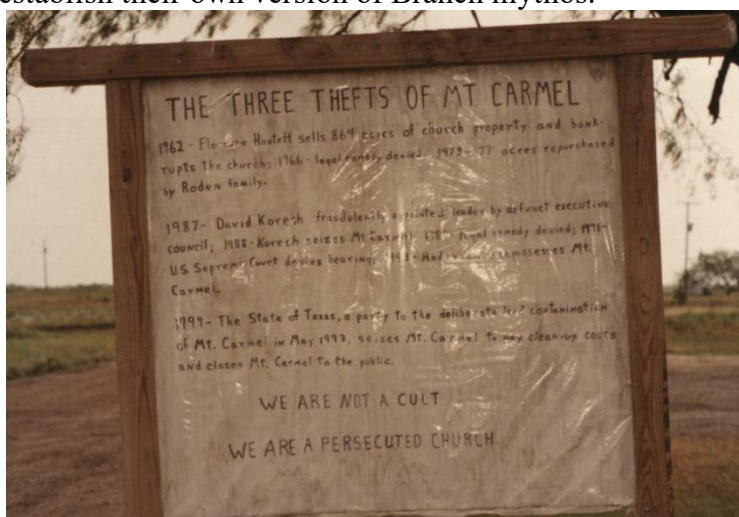
⁵⁰ Isaiah 45:1-2 (King James Version Bible)

⁵¹ Richard Gottheil and Max Schloessinger, “Cyrus,” *Jewish Encyclopedia: The unedited full-text of the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia*, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4828-cyrus#anchor7>.

⁵² [Waco] Branch Davidians: Amo Paul Roden papers, Accession #3312, Box #1, Folder #1.

amongst God's people, we will definitely have a deliverance as all the prophets agree."⁵³ Koresh further builds upon the Branch's mythos by using the Seal as a means to bring the church back together after a climatic event. His comments represent a call to evangelize and spread the Word of God further. The comments following each cited Biblical verse indicate that Koresh not only sought to communicate his perspective, but also ensured that his legacy would grow *posthumously*. Koresh's translation of the first seal made its way into the hands of religious scholars, thanks to Ruth Riddle escaping the inferno with a digital copy on hand, although as it turns out the Seven Seals would play a lesser role in the evolution of the Mount Carmel myth than Koresh desired.

Multiple actors enabled the development of myth. In the aftermath of the Mount Carmel siege, Branch Davidians loyal to the Roden Family, Branch Davidians loyal to Koresh, and groups without an affiliation with the Branch Davidians, sought to transform the mythology to meet their own desires. Roden Family loyalists erected a sign outside of the remains of Mount Carmel in 1994 to establish their own version of Branch mythos.



The Three Thefts of Mt. Carmel⁵⁴

⁵³ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Amo Paul Roden papers, Accession #3312, Box #1, Folder #1.

⁵⁴ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #5, Folder #4, The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

The glare on the picture limits the readability of its three main points; however, a close look at the original pictures shows highlights from the main points. “1962- Florence Houteff sells 864 acres of church property and bankrupts the church...1973-77 acres repurchased by Roden family. 1987- David Koresh fraudulently appointed leader by defunct executive council; 1988- Koresh seizes Mt Carmel... 1994- The State of Texas...seizes Mt Carmel to pay clean-up costs and closes Mt Carmel to the public.”⁵⁵ The Rodens placed the sign to control their version of Branch Davidian history and to control the narrative moving forward. The Rodens attempted to reinstall their family as the rightful leaders of the Branch Davidians, while distancing themselves from Florence Houteff, the last Mount Carmel leader of the Davidians, and Koresh.

The grounds of Mount Carmel currently maintains a chapel built over the remains of the compound, a couple of homes, and a visitor center. The chapel feeds the ongoing Branch Davidian mythology. The entrance to the chapel has literature holders containing flyers titled *Waco: A New Revelation*. The flyer contains a cornucopia of propaganda and conspiracy theories, akin to the modern day QAnon movement. The flyer mixes facts, such as the official death toll, with falsehoods, such as the use of machine guns upon Branch Davidians fleeing the inferno.⁵⁶ The flyer contains two web addresses that indicate production by Roden family loyalists: <http://ourdivineladyofmountcarmel.org> and <http://2branches.info>. *Our Divine Lady* links to a website last updated in 2017, that attempted to revive Lois Roden’s magazine *SHEkinah*. *2 Branches* links to a website last updated in 2013, that contains numerous blog and video entries; the site praises the Roden family, denounces Koresh, and vilifies the Clinton Administration. The flyer uses blame as one of its main points. The flier states, “Many want to

⁵⁵ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #5, Folder #4.

⁵⁶ The Branch, The LORD Our Righteousness, *WACO: A NEW REVELATION*, 1781 Double EE Ranch Rd, Waco, TX 76705, Obtained June 9, 2022, The Branch Davidian Compound, Waco, TX.

blame the government for killing these people, and others want to blame Koresh...the TRUTH of the matter is that they were both at fault. Both sides played God. Not only did David Koresh claim to sit in the seat of God, but in the way the government acted they too acted as if they were God in judging who should live and who should die, without due process of law.”⁵⁷ The flyer simultaneously attempts depict Koresh as a false messiah, while intensifying the actions of the government during the siege. The flyer continues, “The Lord brought terrible judgement on Koresh and his followers through the ATF, FBI, and the Delta Force, the most elite commandos in the world today. Koresh and his followers did not stand a chance in the hands of these trained and licensed assassins.” While the FBI’s HRT is considered one of the most elite elements within law enforcement, the decision to add Delta Force into government actors present during the siege showcases a complete abandonment of reality, as the flyer moves from mere propaganda into the realm of conspiracy. The aftermath of the Mount Carmel catastrophe emboldened conspiracy groups and right-wing separatists nationwide.

While the flyer present at the current Mount Camel site showcases a localized source of propaganda, other widespread forms of propaganda made their way across the United States in various forms, such as bumper stickers.



Branch Davidian Defense Fund Bumper Stickers⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The Branch, The LORD Our Righteousness, *WACO: A NEW REVELATION*.

⁵⁸ [Waco] Branch Davidians: Joe Robert collections, Accession #3205, Box #3, Folder #9 The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Both bumper stickers, created by the Branch Davidian Defense Fund, use shock value to add to the Branch Davidian Myth. The phrase “Welcome to Bosnia, TX Ethnic Cleansing,” directly asks its readers to compare the events in Waco to the genocide of Bosnian Muslims at the hands of Serbs between 1992 and 1995. At the same time, it indirectly asks readers to relate President Clinton to Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević. The second sticker, with the phrase “Is Your Church ATF Approved?,” asks readers to imagine their own house of worship under attack by the government. Both of these stickers helped to shift the myth of the Branch Davidians from tragedy, as a result government overreach and mistakes, to full governmental misfeasance aimed at dissenting citizens. Right-wing separatists and white nationalists both seized upon the evolving myth.

Aside from Koresh’s adamant support for the Second Amendment, the Branch Davidians represented a stark contrast to other right-wing extremist groups. By the time that conflict with the government began in 1993, the Branch Davidians consisted of a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-national coalition.⁵⁹ The makeup of the Branch Davidians in the early 1990s, stood in anathema to desire of right-wing extremist groups to establish a White hegemony. Ironically, the devastation at the Mount Carmel compound on April 19, 1993, transformed the diverse Branch Davidians into martyrs for White Nationalist movements. The government’s miscalculations at Mount Carmel commenced merely six months after its last bungled intervention at Ruby Ridge in Idaho. White Nationalists and other right-wing groups seized the Branch Davidian narrative and shifted the focus away from a church with a leader on the wrong side of the law to an ongoing call for action. Famously, the Branch Davidian myth served as motivation when

⁵⁹ Michael Barkun, “Appropriated Martyrs: The Branch Davidians and the Radical Right,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19 no. 1 (Feb 2007): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550601054956>.

Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols carried out the largest domestic terror act in US history, the 1995 Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing, on the second anniversary of the Mount Carmel tragedy. In the article “Motivated Martyrs,” political scientist Michael Barkun writes, “The radical right found it easy to hijack the Mt. Carmel community and engraft its history onto their own. This was made easier by the fact that few people knew much about Branch Davidian doctrine. The community was small and insular before the standoff... Afterwards, the handful of survivors had meager resources and took support where they could find it.”⁶⁰ The mystique and obscurity of the Branch Davidians eased the radical right’s embrace of their mythology. Extremist groups, using the Branch Davidian tragedy, have pushed Koresh’s thoughts of multi-ethnic and multi-national acceptance to the wayside to justify their own nefarious ends. In modern day, the Branch Davidian myth has guided religious separatist and extremist groups to find homes within right-wing populist political movements.

Current Branch Davidians and their sympathizers continue to demonize the Clinton family, Democrats, and traditional pre-Trump Republicans. As the historical record continued to reveal government misfeasance in years following the siege, the public adjusted their own perspective of the siege narrative. In the era of populism, the Branch Davidian myth attacks traditional liberal and conservative politicians. Conspiracies, such as President Clinton directing Delta Force into action during the siege, continue to fester. Famous conservative families, like the Bush’s, are demonized by the growing mythology.

⁶⁰ Barkun, “Appropriated Martyrs,” 119.



Hillary for Prison Sign inside Chapel⁶¹



Clinton and Bush Crime Families⁶²

Cohen writes, “Once assertions about the past enter deeply into people’s minds (and hearts), it is arguable that they acquire a truth of their own, even if this truth does not at all coincide with what actually happened at some point in past time. At the very least such assertions are true statements about what people believe and therefore must occupy a central place in any history of human consciousness.”⁶³ The mythology surrounding the Mount Carmel siege has morphed from a fable of caution toward government overreach to fueling anti-government sentiment. An evolving mythology allows for, as Cohen stated, assertions of the past to affect perception of the present. The Branch Davidian myth motivated individual and small group action, such as the Oklahoma City Bombing, in its immediate aftermath. Yet its continued evolution spurns massive political dissent, aggressive rhetoric, and political violence in modern day.

⁶¹ Esther Denise Garza, “Branch Davidian Compound,” *Google Maps*, imaged captured June 2019, <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Branch+Davidian+Compound/>.

⁶² Gary Alleccia, “Branch Davidian Compound,” *Google Maps*, image captured July 2022, <https://www.google.com/maps/contrib/102723038818460063097/photos>.

⁶³ Cohen, *History in Three Keys*, 212.

Conclusion

The Branch Davidian siege created multiple perceptions of what occurred over the course of the 51 days in 1993. In the article “Revisiting the Branch Davidian Suicide Debate,” Stuart A. Wright writes, “Control over the framing of the Waco disaster confers power because it represents a struggle over cultural ideas imbued with greater import.”⁶⁴ Engaging in a subject, like the Branch Davidian siege, through a triptych approach presents the situation holistically. Cohen’s methodology engages with the three keys of Event, Experience, and Myth. His approach enables a nuanced understanding, while also granting agency to multiple actors. Examining the siege through the three keys demonstrates how power and influence has shifted over three decades.

The power of the Branch Davidian narrative started in the hands of government and the media. Though missteps allowed power to shift, as the government and media created a cognitive dissonance in the public’s mindset. In the monograph *The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation*, journalist Dick J. Reavis writes, “The line between churches, which Americans believe should be protected from government interference, and cults, which most Americans hold in disdain, has nothing to do with the constitution – whose First Amendment in theory shields both – and everything to do with the prejudices of a nation that has grown fearful of the diversity that made it nearly unique.”⁶⁵ The siege of the Branch Davidian compound created a paradox. On one hand, the government directly interfered with a religious organization, a violation of the First Amendment. Concurrently, the media created a perception of the Branch Davidians as delusional cultists, thus fostering support for government action. Within this paradox the public split, some

⁶⁴ Stuart A. Wright, “Revisiting the Branch Davidian Suicide Debate,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 2 (November 2009): 20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2009.13.2.2>.

⁶⁵ Dick J. Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 12.

maintaining their support for the government, while others perceived the failings of domestic policy. Just as the revelations that came out during the Vietnam War damaged public perception of government in the realm of foreign policy, the disaster at the conclusion of the Branch Davidian siege damaged public perception of government in the realm of domestic policy.

Cynicism towards the government, due to the conclusion of the siege, and coupled with the ongoing presentation of the Branch Davidian experience, enabled the growth of myth to embrace conspiracy, antigovernment rhetoric, and political violence. Eventually, the government recognized the missteps of its actors. The Branch Davidian experience entered popular culture via current documentaries and TV specials. However, the mythology continues to evolve. The early mythology inspired the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing in 1995. Yet in the age of misinformation and QAnon style conspiracy theories, the siege serves as symbol for government overreach and as a rally point for extremists to express feelings of disenfranchisement. Through the holistic picture of the Mount Carmel tragedy, the recent past impacts present day.

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