

**DEADLY ENCOUNTER AT MOUNT CARMEL:
THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN-FEDERAL AGENCY CONFRONTATION
February 28-April 19, 1993**

An interview with Dr. Stuart A. Wright



The Branch Davidian community founded in 1955 at Mount Carmel Center, outside of Waco, Texas, was an offshoot of a previous sectarian offshoot of Seventh-day Adventism, the Davidians established in Waco in 1935. The Branch Davidian community was relatively small, peaceful, and unknown even to residents in the region. It was in 1981 that then twenty-two-year-old Vernon Howell, who later changed his name to David Koresh, first arrived at Mount Carmel. After a period of internal turmoil and a struggle for control of the group, David Koresh assumed control of the movement by the mid-1980s. His group lived away from Mount Carmel from 1984 to 1988, when they returned to take control of the Mount Carmel property. They began renovating the community property and continued their active proselytization campaign. In 1989, as part of his messianic mission, Koresh began teaching a "New Light" doctrine that all the women in the group were to be his wives while all men were to remain celibate. The implementation of this doctrine soon led to defections and allegations of illicit sexual activity. The community drew the attention of Texas Child Protective Services in 1992 over allegations that Koresh was sexually abusing children (but the case was closed due to lack of evidence) and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) over allegations that weapons were being converted from semi-automatic to automatic without proper license application and fee

payment. ATF agents obtained warrants to search the Branch Davidian property and arrest Koresh, and on February 28, 1993 conducted a “dynamic entry” in which six Branch Davidians and four ATF agents were killed. A standoff ensued until April 19, 1993, when FBI agents, who had taken over control of law enforcement activities at Mount Carmel, launched a tank and CS gas assault on the barricaded Branch Davidians. Seventy-six Davidians of all ages died in the conflagration triggered as the culmination of the assault. The sequence of events that eventuated in the destruction of the Branch Davidian community subsequently became the object of extensive media coverage, scholarly research, and governmental investigation. Dr. Stuart A. Wright has been one of the leading scholars in studying Branch Davidian history and the confrontation between the Branch Davidian community and federal law enforcement agencies. In this interview, we draw on Dr. Wright’s extensive work on the Branch Davidians to probe the meaning and significance of the sharply contested tragic events at Mount Carmel in 1993.

Dr. Wright, welcome to the WRSP Forum!

WRSP: Dr. Wright, you have become a leading figure in both academic scholarship and public education on the Branch Davidian community, and particularly the confrontation with federal authorities that led to the deaths of four law enforcement officers and eighty-two Branch Davidians of all ages, the virtual destruction of the Branch Davidian community. What initially stimulated your scholarly interest in the Branch Davidians?

Wright: By the time of the federal raid on the Branch Davidian community in 1993, I had already become concerned about the use of these heavy-handed tactics by law enforcement with regard to new or nontraditional religious movements (NRMs). I had followed the Vermont state raid on the Twelve Tribes (Northeast Kingdom Community Church) in 1984 with great interest. Then there was a rash of government raids on The Family International in Australia and Argentina in the early 1990s as well as other groups. It seemed to me that these raids were being used as weapons of punishment or repression, targeting disfavored religious communities.

WRSP: The Branch Davidians lived in relative obscurity outside of Waco for almost forty years. What were the most important factors that led to the Branch Davidians being regarded as a dangerous cult that required intervention by law enforcement agents?

Wright: I argue that a potent script emerged from a convergence of narratives among cultural opponents of Koresh allied with public agencies that served to consolidate the mutual interests of both law enforcement and Branch Davidian antagonists. In the emergent play of cultural meanings, an overarching “warfare” narrative was constructed that depicted the Branch Davidians as an armed apocalyptic group preparing for a final battle with the Antichrist government forces. The convergence of narratives, in which the theme of warfare was central, helps explain the mentality of federal officials that led to excessive force at Mount Carmel. As such, it was not solely the weapons violations that

moved federal officials to a high-risk, paramilitary raid to execute the warrants but also the imputed link of a “warfare” narrative to firearms infractions that fueled an inflated threat. Federal agents became convinced that the Branch Davidians would not cooperate in an investigation, hated the federal government, were controlled by a fanatical “cult” leader, and would launch a “holy war” if challenged. This is readily apparent in the affidavit accompanying the warrants. What shapes and frames the “warrior cult” motif in the affidavit are the accounts by apostates and detractors who provided ATF investigator Davy Aguilera with embellished descriptions of life at Mount Carmel. Here one finds stories of armed sentries, paramilitary maneuvers and training, weapons stockpiles, “shoot-to-kill” orders regarding intruders, discussions of imminent war, contingency plans for mass suicide, the group’s purported hatred of the government, and their contempt for gun laws. Without these sensational and exaggerated claims lodged against the sect, it is highly unlikely that the ATF would have taken such extreme measures. The critical mistake the ATF made was basing much of its investigation on unreliable information generously supplied by adversaries and opponents of Koresh who were engaged in a moral campaign to take down the sect leader and his movement.

WRSP: Your work along with the larger corpus of scholarship on the Branch Davidians suggests that prior to the armed standoff between the Branch Davidians and law enforcement agencies there were a number of opportunities for law enforcement agencies to take appropriate legal actions that would have eliminated the need for the use of armed force. Would you comment?

Wright: Yes, there were several missed opportunities to enforce the law without engaging in a high-risk, paramilitary raid. First, ATF conducted a surveillance of the Mount Carmel property for two months prior to the raid. They knew or should have known that they could have arrested David Koresh when he left the property on multiple occasions. That strategic approach would have avoided imperiling the lives of 130 other members living at the community. Six sect members and four ATF agents were killed in the initial raid and 74 (76 if you include two in utero) others died in the CS assault on April 19. Second, ATF investigator Davy Aguilera visited gun dealer Henry McMahon months before the raid to question him about guns sold to Koresh. During this visit, McMahon called Koresh on the phone and told him that he was being investigated. Koresh invited the ATF agent out to Mount Carmel to inspect his weapons. The agent refused to talk to Koresh and refused the invitation to inspect the weapons. Third, the ATF had an undercover agent, Robert Rodriguez, at Mount Carmel the day of the raid. When Koresh was tipped off about the impending raid, Rodriguez departed and called his commanding officer to inform him that the element of surprise had been lost and recommended calling off the raid. The agent’s message was ignored and the ATF commanders proceeded with the raid, resulting in a deadly shootout. A Congressional investigation by the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight and the Committee on the Judiciary later castigated the ATF investigation and raid plan as “grossly incompetent.” The Congressional investigation also made a damning observation that “The decision to pursue a military style raid was made more than 2 months before surveillance, undercover, and infiltration efforts were begun” (*Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies toward the Branch Davidians*, p. 4). This statement corroborates the 1993 U.S. Treasury Department report which criticized the ATF raid plan as proceeding on a “preordained road.” It appears that ATF officials were determined to conduct a raid irrespective of intelligence operations that showed Koresh

could have been apprehended away from Mount Carmel or that the element of surprise had been lost only minutes before the raid.

WRSP: In your work you have argued that in initiating and conducting the raid on the Branch Davidian community at Mount Carmel on February 28, 1993, ATF agents violated the procedures that had been approved. Would you give us a few examples of the actions to which you are referring?

Wright: There were numerous problems with the raid preparation and implementation. The Congressional report issued in 1996 faulted the ATF investigation as “poorly conceived” and “significantly flawed.” The report went on to say that the “affidavit filed in support of the warrants (for Koresh) contained an incredible number of false statements” (p. 4). Some of these false statements pertained to gun violations and misrepresentations of law. The report states, “David Koresh could have been arrested outside the Davidian compound,” thus avoiding unnecessary risks to many innocent people, most of whom were women, children, and elderly persons. In making this decision, the Congressional report says “ATF agents exercised extremely poor judgment, made erroneous assumptions, and ignored the foreseeable perils of their course of action” (p. 4). The military training, support, and assistance in the actual raid was only obtained legally by misrepresenting a drug nexus that triggered an exception to the Posse Comitatus law. The ATF alleged to the Department of Defense that it had evidence of “an active methamphetamine lab” on the Mount Carmel property. According to the McLennan County Sheriff’s Department, Koresh found methamphetamine lab equipment upon taking possession of the property from the previous occupant, George Roden, in 1988 and reported it to authorities. The Sheriff’s Department investigated the incident and removed the equipment. The ATF knew or should have known that the drug nexus claim was false. Indeed, it was at the behest of ATF investigator Davy Aguilera that disgruntled apostate Marc Breault agreed to send a fax implying that the meth lab might still be operational, stating ambiguously that one person present at Mount Carmel “did not personally observe” the removal of the drug lab equipment. The Congressional report, however, notes that the building in which the drug equipment was found burned to the ground in 1990, three years before the ATF raid (*Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies toward the Branch Davidians*, p. 46).

WRSP: Once the standoff between the Branch Davidians and law enforcement agencies had begun, were there strategies alternative to force that federal law enforcement agencies could have implemented that might have ended the confrontation peacefully?

Wright: Yes. I have learned a lot about critical incident or hostage/barricade protocols and crisis negotiations in my research. At the outset of the 51-day standoff, FBI special agent in charge, Jeff Jamar, publicly declared that the goal of the standoff was a “peaceful resolution.” But my research indicates that there were deep divisions between the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) and the crisis negotiations team about how to conduct the standoff. While the two parties should have been working in tandem, aggressive and hostile actions by the tactical-oriented HRT undermined good-faith negotiations by the negotiators. It was apparent to me at the time of the standoff that certain actions by the FBI were undermining any trust between the barricaded sect members and the federal agents. I later identified

16 violations of crisis negotiations protocols which clearly sabotaged the negotiations. I don't have sufficient space to discuss each of these but let me provide one example. One principal task of crisis negotiations is to reduce stress. This eases emotions, slows down physiological processes that interfere with decision-making, and allows communication to be more effective. So what did the HRT do? It implemented a "stress escalation" program. The Justice Department log records that FBI commanders thought that this strategy would help "drive a wedge between Koresh and his followers." But it had the opposite effect. It is virtually impossible to reconcile a *stress escalation* strategy with the principle of *stress reduction*. Of course, negotiators complained loudly to FBI commanders but their objections were not heeded. Failed negotiations subsequently were cited by FBI officials as a rationale for organizing a dangerous CS gas assault on the residence. I strongly believe that if the FBI had exercised patience, allowed trust to build between negotiators and sect members, avoided escalating stress, and exercised genuineness in communication, the Branch Davidians would have come out peacefully and a bloodless resolution would have been achieved.

WRSP: Law enforcement officials were in active negotiation with the Branch Davidians for an extended period of time prior to the tank and CS gas assault on April 19, 1993. What was it that led the FBI to abandon the negotiation process and initiate the assault?

Wright: I think negotiations were doomed when HRT commander Dick Rogers decided to "tighten the noose" and initiate the stress escalation strategy. One of the negotiators, Gary Noesner, later wrote a book (*Stalling for Time*) and devoted a chapter to the Waco standoff. Noesner states in his book that when Rogers ordered increased pressure on Koresh and the Branch Davidians, that he "knew this approach would be counterproductive" (p. 110). SAC Jeff Jamar ordered armored Bradley vehicles to move onto the Mount Carmel property as "a visible display of power," a direct contradiction of crisis negotiations protocols. Noesner talks about a "growing disconnect" between HRT and negotiators after this. The show of force by the HRT and the tanks made Koresh angry and negotiations disintegrated.

WRSP: Much has been made in media, scholarly publications, and governmental reports on the April 19, 1993 FBI assault about the question of how the fire that destroyed the Branch Davidian residence began. What is your assessment of the various claims on this, and is this the most significant question in regards to this case?

Wright: There really isn't sufficient space to lay out this argument in the kind of detail that I would like. I would refer people to my published article ("Revisiting the Branch Davidian Mass Suicide Debate," *Nova Religio* 13, no. 2 [November 2009]: 4-24) for the full argument. But let me say that while the question of mass suicide is still an open question, I think there is a compelling case for a government massacre at Mount Carmel. I am not convinced by the arguments made by religious studies scholar Kenneth Newport about a theological rationale for mass suicide in his book (*The Branch Davidians of Waco*). I am deeply troubled by the government's use of massive amounts of CS in closed spaces for six hours on the morning of April 19. Inhalation toxicology studies of high levels of CS exposure have shown it to cause chemical pneumonia and fatal pulmonary edema. Metabolic studies show that absorbed CS metabolizes to cyanide in peripheral tissues. The autopsy reports showed that forty-four of the Branch Davidian

corpses tested positive for cyanide, some with enough to reach concentration levels in the blood to cause coma and death. Calculations by scientists for an independent laboratory concluded that the average concentration of CS inside the Mount Carmel residence was 10 to 90 times that necessary to deter trained military troops. There were infants, children and elderly persons inside the structure that were greatly more vulnerable than “trained military troops.” The delivery methods for the insertion of CS by the FBI also involved using sprayers and firing ferret rounds. Both employ methylene chloride as a suspension agent. Methylene chloride is toxic and may be metabolized by the body to form carbon monoxide. Combustion of methylene chloride can generate other toxic gases, including phosgene, an extremely poisonous gas. Burning CS also produces cyanide. The amount of methylene chloride used by the FBI at Mount Carmel reached 8,000 ppm or sixteen times the level needed to cause intoxication. If sect members were incapacitated by the high levels of chemical agents and gases, they would have been unable to escape even if they wanted. The FBI used 29-foot long, 52-ton M60 Combat Engineering Vehicles to breach the building and push the barricaded sect members into the kitchen and bunker areas which had no back door or windows. There was no ventilation in that part of the structure and this was where most of the children were concentrated. Finally, with regard to the fire, at least one standard chemical reference text notes that CS forms “flammable vapor-air mixtures in large volumes.” The text warns that CS may be “an explosion hazard in confined spaces.” The kitchen area also had plenty of metal appliances that would have created a spark if the tracks on the tanks created metal-to-metal contact, which is very likely. Since the structure was coated with flammable CS and vapor-air mixtures from six hours of CS insertion, it would have been a tinder box and needed only a spark to ignite. The conditions and evidence for a possible massacre caused by aggressive military-like actions at Mount Carmel are ample.

WRSP: Even if we are critical of federal law enforcement actions in dealing with the Branch Davidians, were there not actions on the part of the Branch Davidian community members that contributed to law enforcement intervention and an escalation of the conflict?

Wright: I am a sociologist by training so I would be the first to say that conflicts involve the actions of both parties to an incident such as this. I think David Koresh could have been prosecuted for sexual assault of a minor. His “spiritual marriage” to some of the underage women in the community, even though most were approved by parents, was in violation of state law. There may have been illegal weapons and ordinance on the property, though as I argue elsewhere, the chain of evidence was compromised so that we will never know with any certainty about these charges. Having said that, however, nothing justifies the egregious overreach and police militarization that took place at Mount Carmel. Even FBI Director Louis Freeh admitted later that the actions at Waco were disastrous for federal law enforcement and would not be repeated in future incidents, at least under his watch. And indeed, when the Montana Freemen holed up in a farmhouse in Justus Township in 1996 leading to another major standoff with federal agents, the FBI showed much greater patience, did not exhibit a raw show of force, stayed with good-faith negotiations and genuineness in communication, and the standoff ended peacefully after 80 days.

WRSP: In the wake of the assaults and the resulting loss of life, what are the most important lessons that we can take away from the tragic events at Mount Carmel?

Wright: The Branch Davidian siege and standoff should be studied intensely by law enforcement and criminologists as an object lesson on how not to conduct an enforcement action. There were so many mistakes, miscalculations, and misdeeds by federal agents I don't even know where to begin. But officials had opportunities to execute the warrants without a raid, and without the risk to the many other innocent people who died. Non-lethal options should always be a preference and violent, high-risk, paramilitary raids should be the very last option and done only under the most extreme circumstances, such as with terrorist groups or violent gangs. The Branch Davidians were neither, and they did not deserve the treatment they received. The government destroyed an entire religious community in a senseless act of paramilitary bravado. And as I argue elsewhere, it probably helped to mobilize a nascent, antigovernment Patriot movement that included the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City on the second anniversary of the FBI assault on the Branch Davidians in 1995 which killed 168 people and injured more than 500 others.

WRSP: Following the tragedy at the Branch Davidians' Mount Carmel there were several federal investigations into the events and reports were issued. The last report was in regard to the investigation led by former Senator John C. Danforth as special counsel. In your opinion, where are government reports, including the Danforth Report of 2000, most and least helpful in understanding the events leading to the deaths of 82 Branch Davidians and four ATF agents?

Wright: I was disappointed and dismayed by the Danforth Report. The report's conclusions absolved the government of wrongdoing and a cover-up. But in reading the 152-page report, a large portion of the document is spent discussing missing or concealed evidence, expended pyrotechnic projectiles, incriminating evidence from the FBI Lab report, FBI misstatements to the Attorney General, Congress, and the public, the failure of government prosecutors to turn over exculpatory evidence in the 1994 criminal trial of sect members, withholding key evidence of pyrotechnic devices in the civil case by a government attorney, the failure of officials who authored the Justice Department report to discover and document use of pyrotechnic devices, and various other instances of miscommunication, negligence, and vital omissions. For those who actually read the report, I think they would have come to a very different conclusion about a government cover-up than the Special Counsel. Most of the press coverage centered on the FLIR video that seemed to indicate that FBI agents were shooting at sect members as they tried to escape the fire. Danforth commissioned a reenactment of the incident and concluded that the flashes that appeared to be emanating from the guns of agents were actually reflections from the bright sun of the central Texas sky. Critics responded by noting that FLIR does not capture such reflections by design. The Danforth Report was a government effort at damage control in the face of a larger wave of disillusionment with government overreach and mounting culture wars fueling the profoundly polarized politics that arose around this time.

WRSP: Given the magnitude of the tragedy at Mount Carmel, we might expect that some policies and procedures might have been put in place that would reduce the likelihood of another such episode. Have any productive steps been taken in that regard?

Wright: As I mentioned previously, FBI Director Louis Freeh admitted after Waco that the disastrous actions by federal law enforcement would not be repeated in the future. The Congressional hearings in 1995 did produce some changes by the Department of Justice in managing critical incidents with dissident or militant sects. For one thing, the FBI was forced to create the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) so that agent-responders to critical incidents were given more input and the head negotiator was placed on equal footing with the HRT commander. So when the Montana Freemen arose in 1996, the incident was handled much differently. Negotiators were able to better control the incident, hostage-barricade protocols were observed, and the standoff ended peacefully as the barricaded members walked out after 80 days. But I think in the wake of 9/11, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the extensive expansion of the national security state, and the passage of the Patriot Act, we may be right back to where we were before 1993. I have been reading Radley Balko's new book, *The Rise of the Warrior Cop*, and I find the continued trend in police militarization he documents very disturbing.

WRSP: Has the Branch Davidian case had any effects on concerns and events today, or has it been forgotten by the public?

Wright: The deadly federal siege of the Branch Davidians is now an important part of American culture and religious history. It is a memorial to the worst federal law enforcement disaster on record and will continue to be a touchstone for antigovernment sentiment and movement mobilization. It still informs our politics today. I recently gave a presentation at the 20-year anniversary of the Waco tragedy at Baylor University. A major point I wanted to make to the audience was about the impact of Waco on current politics and policy. I believe that one of the key reasons we cannot get reasonable gun control laws passed through Congress—even in the wake of horrific mass shootings at Virginia Tech, Aurora, Tucson, and Newtown, Connecticut—is because of what happened at Mount Carmel twenty years ago. Conservatives and gun rights groups are always talking about the fear of disarmament. Second Amendment fundamentalists say they need access to assault weapons and large magazines or unlimited ammunition to protect themselves from government. The National Rifle Association and other gun rights advocates continually invoke Waco as a history lesson. The Branch Davidian incident will not be forgotten by the public because gun rights groups will keep this tragedy alive as a reminder as long as we have debates about better and more responsible gun control. And I don't think we are going to solve that problem anytime soon.

Dr. Wright, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

Stuart A. Wright is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminal Justice at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Dr. Wright teaches courses in religion, social movements, and terrorism. He is a former NIMH Research Fellow (Yale) and Rockefeller Foundation Scholar-in-Residence (Bellagio, Italy). In 2000, Lamar University recognized Dr. Wright with a career achievement award as University Scholar. He has authored over fifty publications in scholarly books and journals. He is known internationally for his research on religious and political movements, conflict and violence. He has published five books, including *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (edited, University of Chicago Press, 1995), *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and *Saints under Siege: The Texas State Raid on the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints* (edited with James T. Richardson, New York University Press, 2011). He is currently working on a cross-national study of government raids on new or minority religious communities that will be published by Oxford University Press (coauthored with Susan J. Palmer).

WRSP Interviewer: Dr. Catherine Wessinger

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Branch Davidian profiles

The Davidian and Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists (1929-1981)

<http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/BranchDavidians1.htm>

Branch Davidians (1981-2006)

<http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/BranchDavidians.htm>

Branch Davidians articles/papers

<http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/ARTICLES/BranchDavidians.htm>

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