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Manufacturing Consent about Koresh

*A Structural Analysis
of the Role of Media in
the Waco Tragedy*

How could the Waco tragedy have happened, an event still bewildering to those who value social order, freedom of religion, and the safety of children in our society? The episode, which cost many lives and millions of dollars, riveted the attention of the nation and the world for months, before ending in a fiery holocaust that claimed the lives of those the authorities in charge said they were seeking to help the most—the children.

The official answer, one that apparently most Amer-

icans are willing to accept, is that David Koresh was to blame (see U.S. Department of Treasury 1993). If he had not been a crazy religious fanatic who was willing to die and take his followers with him, then the standoff would have ended peacefully. This psychologizing of the "Waco problem" is as wanting now as it was when such explanations were offered for the tragedy of Jonestown (Richardson 1980). A slightly different version of this simplistic notion is that Koresh was so irrational and unpredictable that he probably would have ordered a mass suicide no matter when authorities acted, so that actions taken on that fateful fifty-first day were irrelevant. This view was developed in the trial of Davidians in San Antonio, where prosecutors expounded on the "theology of death" integral to Koresh's beliefs (Pressley 1994).

The official versions of the tragedy have been roundly criticized by a number of people, not the least of whom were the four behavioral science experts invited by the Justice Department to evaluate the FBI's role in Waco. The reports to the Justice Department by Ammerman (1993), Stone (1993), Cancro (1993), and Sullivan (1993), which are to varying degrees critical of what happened, all suggest that the holocaust probably could have been avoided (see especially Labaton 1993b; Wood 1993; McVicker 1993[1]). Some of their comments are scathing, with accusations that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and the Federal Bureau of Investigation did not understand or take seriously Koresh's beliefs and statements. Instead, religious aspects of the situation were trivialized and the working model used by law enforcement officials was that Koresh was a con man using religion as a cover, and that his followers were dupes or fanatics so enthralled with him that they could not resist. Law enforcement authorities ignored in-house expertise and used questionable sources when they did seek opinions from outsiders. Disagreements over tactics were glossed over and a "them-against-us", "action-imperative" (Stone 1993) mentality won the day, leading inexorably to a tragic ending.

Justice Department experts Sullivan and Stone were quite critical of decisions to "tighten the noose" around the Davidians and to use psychological warfare tactics, an approach that all four experts suggest backfired because it fulfilled Koresh's apocalyptic prophecies. The failure to allow others, including family members, to communicate with Koresh and his followers during the siege, and the refusal to use a third-party negotiator also drew strong criticism. Acceptance of a basic definition of the episode as a "hostage/rescue" situation by authorities was especially problematic (see Ammerman, this volume). Koresh's followers had joined the group of their own free will,

and then most apparently opted to stay with him even during the siege.[2]

Given available alternative modes of action, some of which were even recommended by FBI behavioral science experts, why did law enforcement command officials persist in the approach being taken toward the Davidians? How could authorities proceed with the raid even after it was clear that the element of surprise had been lost? After the abortive initial assault, why did the FBI proceed with its "tighten the noose" policy in the face of considerable evidence that the tactics were not working? How was an official mind-set formed which allowed actions that encouraged the unthinkable to happen— deaths of all the children still inside the building? What was the public thinking as the situation at Mt. Carmel unfolded, and what role did such views play in Waco?

These questions guide the present effort, which will make use of the provocative work of Herman and Chomsky (1988), as well as material from the "politics of representation" literature. My thesis is simple: *Authorities were able to take actions against the Davidians with such impunity because they and members of the general public shared a view of Koresh and his followers and the situation that allowed, even required, such actions.* How this view of Koresh and his followers was developed and maintained is of great interest. Knowing how specific ideas about Koresh and his followers were so quickly tied to the anticultist ideology that has achieved hegemony in the United States (Dillon and Richardson 1991) is crucial to understanding events such as the Waco tragedy.

Manufacturing Consent

Herman and Chomsky (1988) offer a detailed "propaganda model" to explain the performance and organization of mass media in the United States. They claim that the mass media is both directly and indirectly an instrument of dominant corporate and governmental elites, even in an open society such as the United States. They state that (1988, 298): "a propaganda model suggests that the 'societal purpose' of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through the selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises."

Herman and Chomsky marshall considerable evidence for this thesis, focusing on political events of the past few decades to support

their arguments. They do not discuss religion in any direct way, but it seems reasonable to extend their model to encompass religious phenomena, particularly since some religious movements have garnered significant attention in recent years in the media. Such phenomena have become quite politicized, often requiring positions to be taken by politicians and others, including members of the media, from corporate executives and editors to the beat reporter. "Cults" have become big news and are thought of by many as a major new social problem in the United States and elsewhere (Beckford 1985; Robbins 1988; Bromley and Richardson 1983; Barker 1984; Kilbourne and Richardson 1984).

There are strong antipathies expressed toward these religious groups (Bromley and Breschel 1992; Richardson 1992b), and those in positions of authority in the media have contributed directly to these sentiments through choices made about how to cover such stories (van Driel and Richardson 1988a, 1988b; Beckford and Cole 1988; Selway 1989, 1992). The media are the most significant mediating structure between the mass public and marginal religions. Moreover, the media, in confluence of interests with some other institutional structures, have promoted a narrow and particularistic approach consistent with certain American values (Richardson, Kilbourne, and van Driel 1988).

Most people have never met a "Moonie," but large majorities know of them and do not like them (Bromley and Breschel 1992; Richardson 1992b; Pfeifer 1992), an unfounded but negative view generalizable to other new religions that have attracted attention in recent years. Indeed, even groups such as Koresh's that do not fit the usual definition of a new religious movement can be quickly typed as one simply by assigning it to the category of "cult" or by alleging so-called brainwashing and mind control. Such labeling has been a powerful weapon to use against groups thought to be deviant by some.[3] Herman and Chomsky's work, applied to so-called cults, can aid understanding of this circumstance, which contributed in no small measure to what happened at Waco. Only against a backdrop of pervasive anticult sentiment could those in positions of authority concerning Waco adopt the disastrous tactics they chose.

The development of such thoroughgoing contempt for new religions can fruitfully be examined using specific ideas from Herman and Chomsky, who posit a series of five "filters" that determine the quantity and character of coverage in the mass media. First, Herman and Chomsky (1988, 3–14) explain the developmental history of the acute *concentration of ownership in the mass media,* which is an industry dominated by large corporations seeking profits. They dis-

cuss the way major media are integrated, wherein major print and electronic media outlets are often controlled by the same companies and even specific families; and they point out that major media corporations have strong ties with other business institutions such as banks, through overlapping directorates and the use of credit and financial arrangements. Thus, the big business of media is highly interconnected with other institutional structures in our society, raising serious questions about its independence, and about idealized notions of freedom of the press.

The concentration of ownership and control of which Herman and Chomsky write has the potential to affect coverage of religious as well as political topics, especially since cults have become so politicized (Bromley and Robbins 1992). Once major media organizations decide how (or whether) to cover a topic or event, then the decision results in consistent reporting within fairly narrow bounds. There is usually little contrasting coverage, simply because of the much weaker position of the alternative press that might choose to treat a topic differently.

While explanations may vary about why the media have treated new religions in such a negative fashion,[4] it is clear that this has been done. Van Driel and Richardson's (1988a, 1988b) study of major print media over a ten-year period demonstrates the general antagonism toward these organizations, particularly groups such as the Unification Church ("Moonies"), Peoples Temple, Scientology, and Hare Krishna (also see Beckford and Cole's [1988] follow-up of this study in the United Kingdom, as well as Selway's [1989] study of Australian media). Many examples can also be found to illustrate this point with electronic media, as well, even though no systematic content analysis of electronic media exists on this issue. All the major networks have shown made-for-television movies with the theme of "rescuing brainwashed cult members," some a number of times.

Some observers have suggested that this orientation reflects similar values between media representatives and members of the general public—values that fail to acknowledge religion as a serious alternative to secular occupational and material pursuits typifying the individualistic and competitive cultural milieu of the United States (Richardson, Kilbourne, and van Driel, 1988). It may also be that this type of coverage has developed because of increased public interest in titillating stories framed in terms of "cults stealing children" or "breaking up families." Such emotion-laden, demonizing stories sell newspapers and gain viewers; thus those operating the commercial newspapers, and television and radio networks and outlets have been more apt to take that approach.[5]

This latter reason coincides with the second filter of Herman and Chomsky's model—namely *the role played by advertising in the competitive media market.* Herman and Chomsky point out that newspapers and television networks are in the business of selling advertising so they can survive and generate profit, a context that severely limits the approach taken by media outlets toward controversial topics. Herman and Chomsky suggest that media leaders learn quickly what topics will attract advertising, and they are likely to exploit those topics. Moreover, those media choosing to offer particular orientations or "frames" (Goffman 1974) not popular with advertisers are penalized by receipt of less revenue. Framing stories, television movies, and specials on the theme of "cults stealing innocent children," for example, has been a popular seller to advertisers. This perennial anticult myth has achieved the status of urban legend and has been adopted by virtually all mass media outlets.

Herman and Chomsky's third filter focuses on *sources of information.* News organizations have to allocate resources efficiently; they cannot be everywhere at once. Thus, they come to depend on sources—people or places where key information can be found. This leads them inexorably to institutional or governmental sources of information that furnish the official version of an event. Certainly there have been some major statements and presentations about the "cult problem" by governmental entities (Bromley and Robbins 1992; Richardson 1995c, Forthcoming). Federal agencies such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Internal Revenue Service, and the Justice Department have adopted aggressive positions toward new religions that have sometimes become quite public matters. There have been several congressional hearings and reports, some very widely publicized. The federal court system has also rendered decisions in cases involving new religions that have caused great consternation among supporters of freedom of religion (Laycock 1991). A number of state governments have become entangled as well, issuing special studies, reports, and even questionable legislative actions (Richardson 1986, 1990). Local governments and legal systems have also become possible sources of such news, as battles have been fought over zoning laws and solicitation regulations. Some civil and criminal actions involving marginal religions have become newsworthy at the local, regional, and even national levels, leading to well-publicized decisions, many of which imply that these religious groups are a social problem requiring intrusive regulation and control.

While a focus on official sources seems well-placed with reference to the new religions, Herman and Chomsky also posit crucial impor-

tance on *private sources* of information. Their analysis focuses on the role large corporations and their surrogate organizations have in presenting a benevolent view of their activities, and the substantial expenditures devoted to accomplish that end. Thus corporations such as General Electric (which owns the NBC television network), perhaps the largest producer of nuclear weaponry, funds enormous advertising budgets on the theme of "making a better tomorrow" for ordinary citizens. And organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce spend millions in lobbying and information campaigns to cultivate and protect the dominant position of corporations in the United States.

On a smaller scale, private sources of information have also played a key role in developing the image of new religions shared by most Americans. Anticult organizations such as the American Family Foundation (AFF) and Cult Awareness Network (CAN) have had impressive success in shaping public attitudes in the United States and overseas (Bromley and Shupe 1994; Shupe and Bromley 1994; Richardson 1995a, Forthcoming; Richardson and van Driel 1994). These particular organizations operate on budgets mostly garnered from private foundations and individual contributions, spending their resources on public relations and lobbying campaigns aimed at attacking the "cult menace."[6] The organizations, especially CAN, issue regular press releases on major events in the cult wars. AFF publishes a popularly oriented newsletter, the *Cult Observer,* and also an attempt at a refereed professional journal, *Cultic Studies Journal.*[7] Quite often press releases from such anticult groups are treated seriously by media outlets. There are examples of even major papers printing such releases virtually verbatim.

Why organizations like CAN and AFF have had such success is, of course, a significant question. Plainly they have become experienced at what they do, institutionalizing efforts to instill public fears about so-called cults. But they have an impact that far exceeds the relatively meager budgets on which they operate, and they have overcome some major public relations disasters to become a primary source of information.[8] The answer seems to be twofold: (1) CAN and AFF have developed important political alliances, and (2) they are sending a message for which the American public has a certain receptivity.

Friends and allies, which vary in terms of "social distance," include powerful political figures and representatives of some important professions and interest groups in our society. CAN (and its precursor organizations and other groups like it) has furnished information to and worked with state governors, attorney generals, and

legislators; U.S. Senators and Congressmen; the federal Justice Department, and other agencies such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Moreover, CAN and AFF work closely with, and even include in their leadership, representatives of the therapeutic and helping professions and certain religious organizations. Consequently, there is a significant confluence of interest among CAN and similar groups: (1) therapists who think current and former members of new religions need psychological help, (2) politicians who want to legislate against cults, (3) social workers and counselors who think cults destroy families, and (4) religious leaders who, through gatekeeping functions, attempt to protect their respective domains, alleging that cults steal children, or that they are the work of the devil. In some cases, parents of converts are involved, some of whom are quite well-enough placed socially and politically to cause trouble for such groups and to assist those who oppose them (Shupe and Bromley 1980; Richardson 1992a, 1995a).

The receptivity of the American public to the message of the anticult movement—what Shupe and Hadden (this volume) call the "anticult narrative"—is not difficult to understand. The new religions have attracted some young, upwardly mobile, high-status individuals. The investment in children of status-conscious Americans is often considerable. Thus conversion to a new religion may disrupt plans for law school or a career in medicine, eliciting outrage from parents (Richardson, Kilbourne, and van Driel 1988). Explanations about conversion are demanded, and anticult groups have an appealing answer that scapegoats these religious groups and absolves parents and their offspring. This account posits that the convert was tricked by a mysterious and inscrutable (if they were from the East) religious charlatan who was adept at the use of powerful psychotechnology developed first by Communists and subsequently imported for the insidious use in America against "our children" (Richardson, Van der Lans, and Derks 1986).

The account ignores, however, the most common pattern—that persons join volitionally, and that participation is usually brief and often ameliorative, all well-substantiated findings from research by scholars in this field of study (see work of Wright 1983, 1987; Barker 1984; Bird and Reimer 1984; Levine 1984; Galanter 1989; and reviews by Richardson 1985a, 1985b, 1993c, 1994a). The neglect or omission of these findings and the perspective they support occurs quickly and easily, however, because such findings do not fit the brainwashing model that is more conducive to the self-interest of the parties involved.

The Waco tragedy furnishes a case study of how such influence can work. CAN and AFF leaders were highly visible immediately after the initial attack, and CAN's press release capabilities mobilized to the task. CAN and AFF seized this opportunity to interpret the standoff and offer their "expertise" to the media. Literally hundreds of interviews were given by CAN/AFF spokespersons volunteering as self-appointed experts, furnishing narratives of the deadly initial assault, and suggesting tactics. Deprogrammer Rick Ross appeared on major network programs a number of times, talking about his role in advising authorities about the Davidians and what actions should be taken to terminate the siege.

When the fateful fifty-first day arrived and the siege was ended, CAN-affiliated spokespersons were prominent media personalities, condemning Koresh and drawing parallels with Jonestown. One of the most blatant examples of hegemonic, anticult framing occurred when the well-respected *McNeil-Lehrer News Hour* featured psychiatrist Louis Jolyon West, a prominent personage in the movement and a member of the board of directors of CAN. West has a history of long involvement in questionable causes and projects, including research for the CIA on mind-control issues. West's former academic position at UCLA affords him some credibility, and apparently *McNeil-Lehrer* staff thought him the proper spokesman for the evening news on that day. Thus the anticult frame enjoyed a lengthy and influential airing on this premier news show, on an evening when virtually all of America was focused on this tragic event.[9] The involvement of CAN continued with disturbing reports that CAN personnel had been involved in deprogramming surviving Branch Davidians so they would "become productive witnesses for the prosecution" (Wood 1993, 239).

Organizations such as CAN and similarly minded groups also serve an important function referred to in Herman and Chomsky's fourth filter, the *production of "flak" and enforcement of proper perspectives.* Herman and Chomsky discuss the wide range of organizations that have developed to criticize the media when they stray from the politically correct position on some issues. These organizations maintain pressure on media outlets and target media programming that is unacceptable.

This filter is not as important to the issue of the spread of ideas about the new religions, if only because there is so little favorable coverage about these groups, as has been noted. Thus, there is little to criticize, after the fact. However, one could argue that CAN and similar groups serve something of a pre-emptive role, with their

readiness to furnish a strict anticult explanation for any possibly ambiguous event involving a minority religious group (see Lewis, this volume) and some unpopular political groups, as well.

The fifth filter through which any news must pass concerns *anticommunism as a control device,* a filter that now seems a bit antiquated. Herman and Chomsky refer to an overarching ideology that guides the interpretation of all news, but, more important, furnishes a way to harangue or intimidate dissenters into submission. If media personnel or others who were worthy of media attention strayed from the status quo position, they could, during the Cold War, be accused of being soft on communism, a very effective social weapon.

It should be noted, however, that there are clear ties between anticommunism and anticultism, in that development of the mysterious psychotechnology allegedly used by so-called cults was attributed to Communists in Korea, China, and the former Soviet Union (Anthony 1990; Richardson and Kilbourne 1983). In one important sense then, anticultism fits neatly with the overarching anticommunism theme pervasive in American ideology until recently, and it should be remembered that anticultism began twenty years ago, when fear of communism was still strong.

Anticultism also contains other discrete elements that resonate with the anticommunism theme (Richardson and Kilbourne 1983). Many new religions are communal, or at least most of the controversial ones have been, which can inspire reactions reminiscent of the anticollectivism of anticommunist ideology. Furthermore, there were often elements of racism and antiethnic sentiments associated with anticommunism, themes that also can be found in anticultism.[10]

It would be impolitic to argue that anticultism has assumed the prominence of anticommunism. However, anticultism has become diffused in American society. The Gallup Poll (1989) discussed in Richardson (1992b) and the work of Bromley and Breschel (1992), and that of Pfeifer (1992) have shown that there is a pervasive fear of "cults," and that they have become perhaps the most hated groups in America. In a nationwide survey of 1,000 adults conducted by Gallup, 62 percent said that they would not like to have religious sects or cults as neighbors, a figure twice as high as the next most disliked category (fundamentalists) and four or five times as high as the figures for categories such as African Americans, Koreans, Hispanics, Russians, and Vietnamese. As Lewis suggests in an earlier chapter, anticult antipathies have spread widely throughout America, setting the stage for the kind of actions taken at Mt. Carmel.

Worthy and Unworthy Victims

Herman and Chomsky (1988, 31–35) claim that the impact of the five filters narrows the range of what becomes news, a process which leads to a "dichotomization" of subjects. This refers to a simplification whereby topics are defined in black or white terms. An overarching frame is developed within which to present stories about the topic. In short, a selected slant is developed that influences how journalists write about a topic that has become newsworthy.

One crucial choice is to determine whether those being written about are "worthy" or "unworthy" victims. Many newsworthy episodes involve people being harmed, even if the connection seems indirect.[11] Harm itself is not the issue: people being hurt is to be expected in news stories. What is the issue is whether those being harmed deserve it or not. Herman and Chomsky state (1988: 35): "Our hypothesis is that worthy victims will be featured prominently and dramatically, that they will be humanized, and that their victimization will receive the detail and context in story construction that will generate reader interest and sympathetic emotion. In contrast, unworthy victims will merit only slight detail, minimal humanization, and little context that will excite or outrage."

The slant taken with most stories about new religions clearly demonstrates this dichotomization, as research on media coverage shows (van Driel and Richardson 1988a, 1988b; Beckford and Cole 1988; Selway 1989). "Cults," of course, "brainwash" innocent victims, taking advantage of the naivete and idealism of America's youth. Thus, participants are generally defined as worthy victims, as are their families. Media themes concerning the "rescue" of these worthy victims are prominent in television programming about new religions and in print media coverage.

The proposition offered here is that, for reasons discussed, those associated with David Koresh at Mt. Carmel never made it into the category of "worthy victims." Instead, there was an expressed ambiguity about their status. Those living at Mt. Carmel, including even the children, were never fully humanized in the eyes of the general public. We knew little about them as individuals, including details of their lives—their hopes and desires, their hobbies, their goals. We did not see many depictions of them as real human beings. The public was told repeatedly about the crude demographics—how many men, women, and children there were inside Mt. Carmel, and what countries they were from—in large part because media representatives had virtually no access to those inside the besieged site.

The dehumanization of those inside Mt. Carmel, coupled with the

thoroughgoing demonization of Koresh, made it easier for those in authority to develop tactics that seemed organized for disaster (see McVicker 1993, 22). The American public seemed less concerned about those inside Mt. Carmel than they were enthralled with the "Waco miniseries" that unfolded on their television screen every night for seven weeks. The evening news had all the elements to guarantee high ratings—religion, sex, guns, child abuse, and other violence, in tandem with the intrigue and complex plotting by both sides. The drama seemed to imitate a Greek tragedy, moving inexorably toward its predictable climax, and we know that Greek tragedies always involve predetermined sacrifices. That tragic sense of the "meaning" of the Waco tragedy was borne out on April 19 when authorities did what Koresh had been predicting all along to his followers (Richardson 1994b).

Direct Control of the Media

It would be misleading to conduct the analysis without some comment on the direct control of media at Mt. Carmel. Herman and Chomsky's (1988) theoretical scheme focuses on the situation of a competitive media operating within an environment (the five filters) that is "managed," not controlled overtly, such as in an authoritarian state. However, even in a managed society such as the United States, overt control is sometimes sanctioned. This occurs when the society is at war or when law enforcement personnel are involved in an action against alleged criminals. In both situations usual rules of access for the media do not apply, as ample court rulings and laws demonstrate. Those in authority have immense control in such situations, and this allows them to manage the news directly. This certainly happened in Waco. Indeed, some media personnel have said that in the Waco situation there was more governmental control than they had ever experienced in long careers of covering the news (Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993).

Federal officials made an early decision that was enforced throughout the long episode that reporters would not be allowed access to Koresh and his followers.[12] There was little serious thought given by authorities even to organizing effective pool coverage that would allow the limited access for a few media representatives that is sometimes used in situations where danger exists, such as a prison riot with hostages or a war setting (Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993). Instead, a total ban on communication with sect members inside Mt. Carmel was established, and reporters, of whom there were hundreds, were moved progressively

back from the front lines until they were some three miles from Mt. Carmel.

Although the BATF was initially in charge, the FBI assumed control shortly after the abortive raid and retained it until April 20, when the Texas Department of Public Safety assumed control. All these law enforcement agencies used the media for their own ends, inhibiting and restricting information and preventing any empathetic account from the residents of Mt. Carmel. The BATF used the Waco paper and a television station as a scapegoat early on, blaming them for notifying Koresh about the impending raid (U.S. Department of Treasury 1993, 82–88, 157–63). The FBI exploited the media throughout the episode by carefully editing information and issuing only reports that placed their actions in the most positive light. Early in the standoff, the FBI requested that some of Koresh's "ramblings" be played on a radio station, as Koresh had asked, in order to try to gain his surrender. FBI officials became upset when Koresh called CNN directly at one point, and stopped the activity immediately by cutting all phone lines except the one they wanted kept open.[13] Since the FBI was in charge of all press conferences, it was apparent that they were sending messages directly to Koresh, messages that were not necessarily true in a technical sense, but were the result of a concerted strategy by the agency to bring an end to the standoff (see U.S. Department of Treasury 1993, 193–210; Holley 1993, 52; Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993).

When enterprising reporters did seek to get closer than the three-mile limit, they were treated harshly. A number of photographers, tired of the "lens wars" that had developed as media outlets sent stronger and stronger lenses to Mt. Carmel, violated distance limitations imposed by the FBI (Wilson 1993; Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993, 20). They were summarily arrested, thrown to the ground, handcuffed, and taken away to jail. There were other examples of physical and verbal abuse of reporters trying to get the story (Department of Treasury 1993, 110). Such treatment was protested strongly by media representatives. Shelly Katz, *Time-Life* photographer, declared that "in over thirty years, twenty-seven of which have been with *Time-Life*, I have covered everything from wars to riots—you name it. I have never been restrained as I was in Waco, and I will say needlessly and senselessly" (Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993, 7). But such treatment continued and did send a message that violating the rules was serious business, and would be dealt with harshly.[14]

Koresh and his followers knew that they were losing the media war, for they continually requested access, sometimes even unfurl-

ing homemade banners made from bedsheets ("God Help Us, We Need Press") asking for contact with the media. Some of the reports by the behavioral scientists cited earlier criticized this ban on such interaction and communication, as did attorney Dick DeGuerin (Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993, 14–17). It now seems quite plausible that had the media been allowed better access, it might have resulted in a different outcome. Better access, however, would have perhaps had the effect of humanizing Koresh and his followers, which would have undercut the seemingly official policy of demonization. This might have made it more difficult to contemplate the kinds of actions that were taken against the men, women, and children at Mt. Carmel. Better interaction might also have put more people in contact with Koresh, who could have discussed his theological ideas in a serious way that would have led to some modification of those ideas. And most important, allowing media personnel some access might have served to defuse the intense situation that was obviously developing within Mt. Carmel, as the noose was tightened day after day. Media personnel could even have served as third-party negotiators with Koresh, not an unprecedented occurrence in such situations.

But none of this happened, of course. Instead, FBI tactics, and Koresh's response to those tactics, moved the situation tragically toward the conflagration that occurred, unimpeded by the scrutiny or assistance of the media. The effort at managing and controlling the media was virtually a total success, but the "operation" itself was a complete failure: most "patients," including the children, died.

Concluding Comment

This structural analysis has been critical of both the media and the authorities handling the situation in Waco. The media have contributed directly to development and promotion of the anticult paradigm, to the extent that it can reasonably be referred to as a dominant hegemony of thought about new religions among the general public (Dillon and Richardson 1991). There is a politically correct ideological position on so-called cults. Any group that drifts far from the bounds of ordinary acceptable values and behaviors stands to be accused of being a "cult," and anyone who defends such groups stands to be called a "cult-sympathizer," with all that is implied by those terms (see Richardson 1993a).[15] Such pervasive anticult sentiment makes it easier to justify and defend the kinds of strategies that were implemented at Mt. Carmel. Indeed, such a hegemonic view

was essential to what happened, and grasping that fact makes the fiery holocaust itself more understandable.

Having made that general point, however, it must be said that the media cannot be blamed for the specific way the tragedy developed. The several authorities in charge, from beginning to end, must be held responsible for the many bad judgments and misguided plans that were developed before, during, and even after the fire. A key element of the strategy taken, particularly by the FBI, was to exercise total control over the media. Authorities treated the media simply as a resource to be allocated and used as they desired, and as a nuisance to be dealt with severely if they refused to comply. In the end, of course, official reports about the tragedy blame the "irresponsible media" for much of what happened, an account that ironically is suggestive of further controls over the media in future situations of this kind.[16]

This authoritarian and even disdainful way of dealing with media by the authorities should concern all citizens of our society who value individual freedom and who think that a reasonably unfettered press is essential to democracy. Those studying what happened at Waco should add to the list of casualties the idea of a free press, even as we have seen it developed within the American context Herman and Chomsky describe. Also, those who want to avert future tragic episodes such as occurred at Waco should carefully re-examine the process whereby simplistic anticult views about the meaning of new religions have achieved such hegemony in American society.

Notes

1. James Wood, editor of the *Journal of Church and State*, observes (1993: 239), "If the state had intervened elsewhere in the world against a religious group as had occurred at the Branch Davidian compound, it would have been reported in the U.S. as an act of oppression." Dick DeGuerin, Koresh's attorney, claimed (in McVicker 1993) that (1) the BATF was attempting to grandstand to support their budget request, which was before Congress in March; (2) that the BATF had a "long history of . . . excessive force, abusing their authority" (p. 17); (3) the search warrants were deficient in crucial ways; and (4) the BATF refused an invitation from Koresh prior to the raid to come to Mt. Carmel to inspect the guns.

2. Obviously one cannot say that the small children had chosen to join and stay of their own free will. Therefore it makes some sense to think of the children as hostages, as did the FBI's own behavioral experts. However, it is virtually impossible to understand why, if that was the think-

ing, the FBI authorized the tactics it did at the end. The CS gas was extremely irritating, even lethal, to all, especially young children who did not have proper gas masks (see Stone's detailed discussion of this point). As Stone notes (1993, 35), autopsies revealed that most of the children died of suffocation.

3. This labeling was done post hoc to People's Temple, about which few were concerned until the mass suicide in Guyana. But once the event had occurred, it was politically expedient for antagonists of new religions to exploit that tragedy to promote anticult themes and interests (Richardson 1980). See Robbins, Anthony, and McCarthy (1983) for one of the first systematic analyses of the use of so-called brainwashing and mind-control accusations as a powerful social weapon to stigmatize unpopular groups.

4. It would be interesting to find out whether any offspring of members of major media families have been involved with some of the new religions. This would not be surprising, given the educational levels and class origins of many members of some of the groups, which were higher than those of the general public (Barker 1984; Wuthnow 1978). Certainly the sons and daughters of some quite prominent and wealthy Americans have had this type of experience, an involvement that might have served as a catalyst for a more negative orientation of major media corporations. The beginnings of "medicalization" of participation in new religions owes much to such a direct personal connection. The author of the first article about "destructive cultism" in a major professional journal Eli Shapiro (1977), was writing from his experience of attempting to extract, through deprogramming and the use of conservatorship laws, his son Edward from the Hare Krishnas (Richardson and Stewart, 1990; Richardson, 1992a). The term "destructive cultism" coined by Shapiro has become a byword of those concerned about new religions, used as if it refers to a new psychological syndrome.

5. I have encountered this deliberate selectivity in working with the media over years of research in the area of new religions. When my perspective or analysis did not fit with the view that the reporters had, then they were much less interested in what I had to say. I have also had several discussions with reporters who were interested in a perspective other than the anticult party line, but who said that upper management might not agree, and that the story might not run. Sometimes they were correct in that assessment.

6. Information on CAN, a tax-exempt charitable and educational organization, is available through its "990" forms, which are filed with the IRS and become public records. This data source reveals a number of foundations that give regular amounts to CAN. Also, there are allegations that CAN serves as a go-between for concerned parents and deprogrammers, and then receives kickbacks from deprogrammers. Such allegations are hotly denied by CAN officials, but are belied by such information as that contained in affidavits filed by some former CAN officials and deprogrammers, as well as the federal trial of deprogrammer

Galen Kelly, who was found guilty of federal kidnaping charges in 1993 and was sentenced to a seven-year prison term.

7. The effort to bootleg this journal into the arena of refereed professional journals has followed on the heels of severe criticism of some anticult legitimators for not presenting their brainwashing-based theories in legal, legislative, and professional forums. One prominent criticism was that such ideas had not been published in refereed professional journals, and thus were not subject to the rigors and scrutiny of the relevant disciplines. After this criticism gained momentum, some major figures in the anticult movement established a "professional organization" and assumed sponsorship of the Cultic Studies Journal, now promoted as a refereed professional journal.

8. One former CAN leader, Reverend Michael Rokos, was dropped when it became known that he had been arrested on morals charges. Rokos was arrested in Baltimore in 1982 for soliciting sex with a male police officer posing as a minor. The former president of CAN resigned in 1990. CAN's contacts with deprogrammers, some of whom seem quite disreputable, also have detracted.

9. It is noteworthy that Herman and Chomsky (1988, 25) chose participation on the McNeil-Lehrer program as a major indicator of what type of people are selected as experts in the areas of defense and terrorism. This program, which is seen overseas in a number of countries, as well, is a major validator of experts in American society.

10. The consequences of widespread acceptance of anticultism are somewhat similar to those of pervasive anticommunism. Herman and Chomsky (1988, 30) discuss the effects in an insightful passage that I shall quote, with anticultism substituted for anticommunism, to illustrate the point: "When [anticult] fervor is aroused, the demand for serious evidence in support of claims of [cult] abuses is suspended, and charlatans can thrive as evidential sources. Defectors, informers, and assorted other opportunists move to center stage as 'experts,' and they remain there even after exposure as highly unreliable, if not downright liars."

This passage seems to describe well what has happened, especially as demonstrated with the tragic Waco episode.

11. For instance, a story could simply be a report about the official U.S. position on a violent episode in a Latin American country. The position assumes, however, that one side is correct and the other is the aggressor. As Herman and Chomsky point out, the politically correct side can literally get away with murder, for its cause is deemed just, whereas those designated the aggressors can do only evil, receiving no credit for any good deeds they might do.

12. Wilson (1993) quotes a Houston Post reporter, Terry Kliewer, as saying: "The FBI . . . was kind of using us like tools. Most of us could sense it at the time, but we did not have a great deal of alternative. When the FBI said something as a matter of fact, we tried to be reasonably skeptical about it . . . but it wasn't easy to juxtapose it next to somebody else's version of the same thing. They [the FBI] had the only version . . .

because, of course, [Koresh] was incommunicado to the general public. We were all hamstrung that way."

13. Herman and Chomsky (1988: 307) close their book with a brief comment about the development of cable and satellite communications systems such as CNN, which they think is a major structural change in opposition to centralized control of the propaganda system based on traditional oligopolies in the print and electronic media. The kind of access allowed via satellites and cable directly attacks traditional controls, making the operation of the five filters discussed herein somewhat skewed if not yet obsolete. The best example of this lack of control was the presence of CNN personnel in Baghdad during the Gulf War, giving the world "the other side of the story." CNN was severely attacked for having people there because it upset the usual control of the news afforded authorities in a war situation. The attacks against CNN, of course, were made using the rationale that CNN was forced to become a propaganda arm for the Iraqis by virtue of the tenuous position CNN reporters occupied there. However, the spoon-feeding of reporters at the daily arranged briefings did not compare well with the kind of coverage coming from Baghdad directly via CNN. Hence the attacks on CNN. Perhaps the experience of authorities in the Gulf War with the new technology even contributed to new media control procedures such as those used at Mt. Carmel, which were extremely rigorous.

14. Attorney DeGuerin (McVicker 1993; Freedom of Information Foundation Conference 1993) was very critical of media representatives for agreeing to accept the kind of control exercised on them by the government, saying that this acquiescence helped governmental authorities protect themselves and their agencies from criticism. Also, at the FOIF conference, John Lumpkin, Texas AP bureau chief, complained mightily about how he was treated when trying to gather information about the situation at the courthouse in Waco. He was not allowed even to talk to a federal judge about an aspect of the situation. The Waco situation reminds one of the collusion between media and police authorities in the famous Hilton bombing case in Australia, also involving an unpopular religious group (Ananda Marga), which resulted in long prison sentences for three innocent people (see Anderson 1992, especially chapter 27, "Crime and the Mass Media").

15. There is currently a declaratory judgment motion pending in Federal District Court in New York's Southern District to stop the FBI and other federal authorities from referring to the New Alliance Party as a cult. This left-oriented political party, which was successful in getting its candidate for U.S. president, Dr. Lenora Fulani, an African American woman, on the ballot in all fifty states, has been very critical of established ways of doing things in American society, especially focusing on endemic racism in America. They claim a disinformation campaign against them by the FBI and other federal agencies, in conjunction with Cult Awareness Network and the Anti-Defamation League, who have issued reports on the NAP that have been circulated by the FBI through-

out the country, as part of an ongoing investigation of the NAP. The motion alleges that the FBI has chosen in their press releases and comments of late to use the term "organized political cult" to refer to the NAP, a tactic that the NAP claims undercuts its ability to function as a political party. The NAP seems well aware of the hegemonic implications of this subtle but effective way of designating the organization, and wants it stopped. The motion claims that the NAP fears that this labeling by officials is a prelude to another military-like action such as occurred in Waco. Another political group sometimes referred to as a cult by CAN and the media is that headed by Lyndon LaRouche.

Note that a motion was filed in the San Antonio Davidian trial, requesting that the prosecution be precluded from using the term "cult" to refer to the Davidians. The motion was rejected by the judge, however (Fair 1994). A similar motion was granted in a major Australian child custody case in 1994 (Richardson 1995d), establishing a first such legal precedent.

16. This is reminiscent of the recommendations from official studies of the Jonestown tragedy. The huge official report, which was mostly a compilation of newspaper coverage, ended with recommendations that the Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts be weakened to allow more thorough investigation of such groups and the people associated with them in order to avoid future events such as the mass murder/suicide of Jonestown (see Richardson 1980).

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8

ANSON SHUPE AND

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Cops, News Copy, and Public Opinion

Legitimacy and the Social Construction of Evil in Waco

Introduction

Few Americans had ever heard of a sectarian group called the Branch Davidians until the last day of February in 1993. The American public was not alone in being unaware of the Davidians. 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 (Baylor 1993, 4). 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