

In Expecting the End: Millennialism
in Social + Historical Context,
ed. Kenneth G.C. Newport
and Crawford Gibben
(Waco: Baylor University
Press, 2006).

Chapter Nine

The Branch Davidians and Religion Reporting—A Ten-Year Retrospective

Catherine Wessinger

Studies of new religious movements and violence have demonstrated that violence involving religious groups is interactive in nature: the quality of the interactions of a variety of forces in the outside society with the believers is crucial for determining the potential for volatility.¹ These forces and actors in mainstream society include the media, law enforcement agents, and former members. All of these types of actors contributed to the conflict in 1993 known by the shorthand term “Waco,” which occurred at the Branch Davidians’ residence called Mount Carmel. Media personnel were major players in the conflict between federal law enforcement agents and the Branch Davidians, from the ATF assault on February 28, which resulted in ten deaths, to the FBI tank and gas assault on April 19 that culminated in the fire, which caused seventy-four deaths. The media shaped the public perceptions of the Branch Davidians underlying the conflict. The media were the locus of the struggle to define the events at Mount Carmel, and that struggle continues.²

Generally, from 1993 to 2003, reporting in the print media about the events at Mount Carmel evolved from “cult” stories to stories about excessive actions by federal law enforcement agents against an unconventional religious group. In 2003 a greater effort was made in the print media to

depict the diverse viewpoints of the actors in the drama. However, the storyline remained highly contested. Federal agents and their anti-cult advisors still had vested interests in maintaining the "cult" filter through which the events at Mount Carmel were viewed.³

Since 1993, religion scholars and reporters have made greater efforts to be in touch with each other. As a result, religion reporting in the print media, especially on new religious movements, has improved in some ways, but remains uneven. This chapter does not deal with television reporting, where the "cult" stereotype remains dominant.

Here I shall discuss the roles that media representatives played in the conflict at Mount Carmel and indicate the main contours of reporting on this case. I compare particularly the *Waco Tribune-Herald's* 1993 "Sinful Messiah" series with its 2003 "Flashpoint in History" series as suggesting how the print media reporting on this case has changed while remaining the same. The stories by Lee Hancock of the *Dallas Morning News* are discussed as representing some of the most in-depth investigative reporting on this case: Hancock's stories have impacted upon federal handling of the matter. The perspectives of surviving Branch Davidians on the media are presented, particularly in the voice of Bonnie Haldeman, David Koresh's mother. Lastly, I address the efforts made by religion scholars and reporters to improve religion newswriting.

The Media and the Conflict at Mount Carmel

Various media and media representatives were intimately involved in the conflict at Mount Carmel, from the beginning to the fiery end. Media representatives contributed to the debacle, and all parties involved used, or attempted to use, the media.

After the *Waco Tribune-Herald* had been contacted by former Branch Davidians, reporters Mark England and Darlene McCormick began research in June 1992 on stories that became known as the "Sinful Messiah" series. The Branch Davidians were a group that had split off from the Seventh-day Adventist Church that had existed in the Waco area since 1935. David Koresh, aged thirty-three, was the fourth in a line of Branch Davidian prophets. The research of England and McCormick focused on allegations that weapons were being stockpiled and that Koresh was having sex with underage girls. The series was ready for publication in February 1993, about the time that agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) were preparing to carry out a "dynamic entry" to serve an arrest warrant on Koresh and to search for illegal weapons. The ATF commanders in charge of "Operation Trojan Horse," Phillip Chojnacki and Charles Sarabyn, fearing that the series would create a more defensive posture at Mount Carmel, negotiated with *Waco Tribune-Herald* editors, the

paper's publisher, and a Cox Enterprises vice president, seeking to postpone publication until after the raid. Thus began a dance between the newspaper and the ATF, with the *Tribune-Herald* seeking to publish the series before the raid and the ATF seeking to launch the raid before the series was published. The dance resulted in media representatives being directly involved with the disastrous events of February 28, 1993.

The *Waco Tribune-Herald* began the series on Saturday, February 27, thinking that the ATF raid would be carried out on Monday, March 1. The first story alleged that David Koresh had sex with underage girls and administered severe spankings to small children, as well as having accumulated and utilized a variety of weapons. David Koresh was painted as having all the worst characteristics of a "cult leader." When the first story appeared, ATF agents decided to launch the raid on Sunday, February 28. Tommy Witherspoon, a *Waco Tribune-Herald* reporter, and Dan Mulloney, a cameraman for KWTX-TV in Waco, separately received tips, which they confirmed with each other, that the raid would occur on the morning of February 28.⁴

There were two KWTX-TV vehicles and three vehicles containing *Waco Tribune-Herald* reporters on the roads just outside Mount Carmel early on February 28. A cameraman for KWTX-TV was lost when he was approached by David Jones, a Branch Davidian whose car was marked "US Mail," who asked if there was going to be a raid. The cameraman's shirt had a KWTX-TV logo on it, and police traffic could be heard on his scanner. Jones returned to Mount Carmel with the information that ATF agents would be arriving soon. He had gone out early that morning to buy a copy of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* in order to read the second installment of the "Sinful Messiah" series.⁵

Early on the morning of February 28, an ATF undercover agent, Robert Rodriguez, brought a copy of the Sunday *Waco Tribune-Herald* to Mount Carmel under the pretext of wanting to discuss it with Koresh. Rodriguez was really checking to see if the series had provoked defensive preparations on the part of the Branch Davidians. While Rodriguez was receiving a Bible study from David Koresh, the latter was called out. When Koresh returned he was shaking, and stated that he knew the ATF and National Guard were coming to get him. Rodriguez hurriedly left Mount Carmel to return to the undercover house across the road and called his commanders, begging them to call off the raid because the element of surprise had been lost. According to the plan, the raid should have been called off in this event, but instead Sarabyn told the agents to hurry up, "They know we are coming. It's show time."⁶

Immediately before the seventy-six ATF agents arrived in cattle trailers to carry out the raid, a car carrying *Waco Tribune-Herald* personnel, including Tommy Witherspoon, parked on the road directly in front of Mount

Carmel to take photographs, even though they had just been told to leave by an ATF agent in a nearby house.⁷

The raid was carried out beginning at 9:45 a.m. While National Guard helicopters flew over the residence, ATF agents were transported to the front door in cattle trailers, with Mulloney and John McLemore of KWTX-TV following in their vehicle. A shoot-out began at the front door of the residence and on the second floor, where ATF agents attempted to enter the building through a window. Mulloney and McLemore came under fire along with the ATF agents. The *Waco Tribune-Herald* personnel took cover in a ditch on the road when shots were directed at them.⁸ At the conclusion of the shoot-out, four ATF agents were dead and twenty were wounded; five Branch Davidians were dead and four were wounded, including David Koresh. Branch Davidian Michael Schroeder, aged twenty-nine, was shot and killed by ATF agents later that day as he attempted to return to Mount Carmel on foot.

On the following day, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrived to take over what became a fifty-one-day siege, and they took control of the media's access to information about the case. Mount Carmel was surrounded by tanks, and negotiations were carried out by telephone. Mount Carmel's telephone connections to the rest of society were blocked by the FBI, because on February 28 Koresh had given interviews to CNN, KRLD radio in Dallas, and the *Dallas Morning News*. From that point on, the FBI largely controlled information about events at Mount Carmel. Even the relevant court documents were sealed during this time.⁹ Reporters were pushed back three miles to a site that was dubbed "Satellite City." The "Sinful Messiah" series became the first reference for reporters converging on Waco and shaped how the Branch Davidians were depicted in the national media. FBI news briefings became occasions for agents to deride Koresh and the Branch Davidians' beliefs in attempts to manipulate them.¹⁰

The Branch Davidians, realizing that they were being demonized in the media, wanted to get their side of the story out. Having had difficulty communicating with FBI negotiators, the Branch Davidians requested that reporters be permitted to serve as mediators. On March 9, the Branch Davidians hung from a window a sheet reading "God Help Us. We Want the Press." On March 14, they hung out another banner reading "FBI broke negotiations, we want press." On March 16, Branch Davidians used flashlights to convey a message in Morse code: "SOS, SOS, FBI broke negotiations. Want negotiations from press." After this, the FBI directed bright spotlights into the residence at night.

During the siege, a total of fourteen adults and twenty-one children came out of Mount Carmel. But whenever adults began to exit, FBI agents punished the Branch Davidians by ratcheting up psychological warfare tactics: blasting high-decibel sounds at them, making threatening maneuvers

in the tanks, cutting off electricity, and using the tanks to destroy vehicles. Adults who came out were dressed in orange prison jumpsuits and paraded before the television cameras handcuffed and shackled.

Early in the siege, David Koresh said they would come out if an audio-tape containing a sermon by Koresh was played on major stations. It was played on March 2 by KRLD radio and the Christian Broadcasting Network. However, Koresh then relayed to FBI agents that he was instructed by God to wait for further orders about what they should do. During the siege, FBI negotiators and the Branch Davidians sent each other videotapes in order to facilitate communication. The videotapes made by the Branch Davidians were not released to the media.

Despite communication difficulties, notably the FBI agents refusing to listen to what they called the Branch Davidians' "Bible babble," progress was made in negotiations, particularly when two Bible scholars initiated a creative intervention to communicate with the Branch Davidians in their Bible-based language and take seriously their concern with biblical prophecy. On April 1, Dr. Phillip Arnold of Reunion Institute in Houston and Dr. James Tabor of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, discussed the biblical prophecies on the Ron Engleman talk show on KGBS radio. They offered to the Branch Davidians an interpretation of the prophecies suggesting that God wanted them to come out and did not intend for them to die at that time at the hands of the agents of "Babylon" to initiate the apocalyptic end-time events.¹¹ David Koresh and the Branch Davidians found Arnold and Tabor's arguments persuasive and told FBI negotiators that they would come out after Passover, a seven-day holiday. Passover ended on April 13, and on April 14 Koresh sent out a letter saying that after he wrote his "little book" interpreting the Seven Seals of the book of Revelation they would come out. The negotiation audiotapes recorded the Branch Davidians cheering at the prospect of coming out.¹² On April 16, Koresh reported that he had completed his interpretation of the First Seal, and the Branch Davidians requested a battery-operated word processor to facilitate the production of the manuscript. On April 17, they again asked for a word processor. In the meantime, Attorney General Janet Reno was told that negotiations were going nowhere, and she approved a plan to carry out a CS gas and tank assault on the residence.

The FBI assault began at 6:00 a.m. on April 19, while the world watched on CNN. Tanks used grenade launchers to hurl in ferret rounds containing CS gas. Tanks punched holes in the walls, dismantled the building, entered, and sprayed CS gas. At 9:10 a.m. the Branch Davidians hung out a banner saying "We want our phones fixed," indicating a desire to negotiate. The young children and their mothers huddled inside a concrete room on the first floor to escape the gas. A tank entered the building, destroying the one passageway leading away from the concrete vault and

knocking concrete into the room, and may have inserted CS gas directly into the room. Fires started at 12:07 and 12:08 in three parts of the building where tanks had entered. The fires quickly escalated to consume the building. Fire engines arrived at 12:34 but were held back by FBI agents. The fire raged while the tanks pushed the burning walls and debris into the conflagration. The causes of the fires were disputed. FBI agents alleged that some Branch Davidians set the fires, while Branch Davidians alleged that the tanks knocked over kerosene lanterns. Nine Branch Davidians escaped the fire, including Ruth Riddle, who had a disk in her pocket on which David Koresh's unfinished manuscript was saved. Seventy-four Branch Davidians died in the fire, including twenty-three children. Among the children were two infants who were born in the fire when their mothers died.

Subsequently, the ATF agents and the families of the four dead agents filed suit against the *Waco Tribune-Herald* and KWTX-TV, alleging that their personnel tipped off the Branch Davidians about the raid. Without liability being admitted, an out-of-court settlement was reached in 1996 for an undisclosed sum.¹³ In a 1994 criminal trial, eleven Branch Davidians were acquitted of murder and conspiracy to murder; five were convicted of voluntary manslaughter and weapons violations; and three were convicted of weapons violations. As of 2003, the surviving Branch Davidians and the families of the deceased Branch Davidians had been unsuccessful in their wrongful-death civil lawsuit brought against the government. Their appeal was rejected in 2005 by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and in 2006 by the Supreme Court.

Manufacturing Consent about Koresh

In an article published in 1995, sociologist James T. Richardson applied the analysis of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky¹⁴ to the 1993 news coverage of the Branch Davidians. The thesis of Herman and Chomsky is that the media determine which victims are perceived as being "worthy" and which "unworthy." Worthy victims will be humanized in the media, the details of their lives and deaths will be given, and the grief of their surviving loved ones will be depicted to generate sympathetic identification by the public. In contrast, minimal information will be given about victims deemed to be unworthy; thus, they will be dehumanized, erased, and no public empathy with them will be generated. Richardson pointed out that much of the news coverage of the Branch Davidians was geared toward "manufacturing consent" that Koresh was a maniacal "cult" leader. The rest of the Branch Davidians were erased from view, either by not being depicted or by being depicted as brainwashed followers, rather than as people who were committed to following God's will as revealed in the Bible. Richardson's thesis was that, because law enforcement agents and the pub-

lic shared a view of Koresh and the Branch Davidians as cultists, authorities were able to take extreme actions against the group with impunity, thinking that the situation "allowed, even required, such actions."¹⁵

Richardson and van Driel,¹⁶ Wright,¹⁷ and other scholars of new religious movements have pointed out that "cult" is a pejorative term conveying a stereotype that has serious consequences when it is applied to a religion. Applying the "cult" label can become a pretext for a government to attack a group and seek to eradicate it.¹⁸

The "cult" stereotype utilized in the 1993 media depictions of the Branch Davidians conveyed what Richardson called "the myth of the omnipotent leader" and the corresponding "myth of the passive or robotic follower,"¹⁹ which contributed to the dehumanization of the Branch Davidians. Richardson and other scholars of new religions contend that neither of these myths bear up under social scientific scrutiny. While there were certainly group processes going on inside Mount Carmel, these were not different from those of many other groups. The "charisma" of a prophet or a messiah is socially constructed, and followers can withdraw their allegiance at any time unless physically constrained from doing so.

On April 9, 1993, Branch Davidian Steve Schneider explained to a negotiator that every day he tested the validity of Koresh's teachings by the Bible. On March 15, Schneider reported that the Branch Davidians were enthusiastic when they heard Dr. Phillip Arnold on a KRLD radio program discussing the Bible, and they requested that Arnold be permitted to discuss the biblical prophecies with Koresh. Schneider asserted that if Arnold could provide biblical interpretations to the effect that the Branch Davidians should come out, they would do so, no matter what Koresh might say. David Koresh himself pointed out to an FBI negotiator that he did not control the Branch Davidians and that his authority with them was based on his ability to interpret the Scriptures, but the negotiator declined to believe that he did not have total control over everyone.²⁰

The ordinary Branch Davidians were relatively visible in local Texas print media. For instance, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* published a story²¹ on Bonnie Haldeman, David Koresh's mother, in which she expressed her love and concern for her grandchildren and their mothers. The *Dallas Morning News* published a story on Koresh's life history that included family photographs.²² But the 1993 coverage in the *Waco Tribune-Herald* and the *Dallas Morning News* was dominated by the "cult" stereotype.

The national news magazines portrayed David Koresh as a deranged, sex-crazed, gun-toting "cult leader," and the Branch Davidians as passive followers. Given the extensive stereotyping of the group as a "cult," it became assumed common knowledge that they were likely to commit mass suicide as with the Jonestown event in 1978, and that responsibility for the deaths would rest solely on Koresh.

As an example of the “cult” stereotype being imposed on the Branch Davidians, the cover of the March 15, 1993 issue of *Newsweek* bore the headline “Secrets of the Cult” in sinister lettering superimposed over a cropped and grainy photograph of Koresh’s forehead with his eyes shaded by glasses. The story recounted the shoot-out at Mount Carmel, styled “an ambush” of the ATF agents. Photographs of the wounded and grieving agents were prominently displayed. The issue included a story on Koresh, followed by a story entitled “Cultic America,” which relied heavily on stereotypes of “cults” provided by the (now-defunct) Cult Awareness Network. Accompanying photographs included those of followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, some of the bodies at Jonestown, the bombed remains of MOVE in Philadelphia, Elizabeth Clare Prophet (whose church had not been involved in violence), and Charles Manson. The following story, “From Prophets to Losses,” had a photograph of the Jonestown residents’ bodies lying close to the vat of poisoned punch, clearly suggesting that “cult” spells out a violent ending.

The Branch Davidians followed the news coverage of their case, and they realized they were being dehumanized in the press. Judy Schneider, aged 41, said in a videotaped statement:

I just hope everyone doesn’t jump to making decisions [about us] before they’ve heard our side, because right now all you’re hearing is the press. You’re hearing a very perverted press.²³

After the fire on April 19, the cover of the May 3, 1993 issue of *Newsweek* depicted Koresh’s face surrounded by flames and the words “Death Wish,” clearly indicating that Koresh was the sole cause of the tragedy. This view was reinforced by the story entitled “The Killing Ground,” which showed the ruins of Mount Carmel with Koresh’s photograph next to the title of the article. The story, “Day of Judgment,” included photographs of Rachel Howell (aged twenty-three in 1993) and her children Cyrus (eight) and Star (six), Floracita Sonobe and her daughter Angelica (the latter came out of Mount Carmel), Melissa Morrison (six, died in the fire), Perry Jones (sixty-four, died as a result of the ATF raid), Rachel Sylvia (thirteen, died in the fire), Steve Schneider (forty-three, died in the fire), together with a list of the deceased Branch Davidians. The article by Melinda Liu and Todd Barrett, “Hard Lessons in the Ashes,” had a photograph of the dead from Jonestown with the caption “Jonestown, like Waco, shows the dangers of cults.” This article cited Rick Ross as being an “expert” on “cults” who alleged that Koresh brainwashed his followers. The article contained the countervoice of Dr. James Tabor saying that the FBI tactics were a mistake: “If you want to make them fanatical, do just what the FBI did.” Other scholarly voices criticizing FBI actions were Phillip Arnold and Robert

Fuller of Bradley University. This article marked a coming shift in the coverage, asserting:

The difference [between a criminal worldview and an apocalyptic one] is enormous and the consequences were tragic—and unless the Feds learn to deal astutely and carefully with religious cults, it is a tragedy that could occur again.

The May 3, 1993 issue of *Time* likewise applied the “cult” stereotype and blamed Koresh as being the sole cause of the tragedy. The cover showed a photograph of Koresh that had been manipulated to make him appear to be laughing maniacally as he gazed toward the sky with his head engulfed in flames. Imposed on the cover was the verse from Revelation 6:8, “His name was Death, and Hell followed with him.” Inside, a story by Richard Lacayo, “In the Grip of a Psychopath,” said that Koresh was the “most spectacular example [of] the charismatic leader with a pathological edge” since Jim Jones of Jonestown. A photograph of Jim Jones reinforced that they were cut of the same mold.²⁴

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman, who served on a commission to make a report to the government about the 1993 events, pointed to the problems caused by the application of the “cult” stereotype to the Branch Davidians. She noted that, when the law enforcement agents invoked religious categories at all to understand the Branch Davidians,

they were categories derived from the definitions of cult leadership and behavior promulgated by the news media over the last two decades. A “cult leader,” according to these images, can be easily seen as a sociopath, and “brainwashed” members can be defined as hostages. By defining a “destructive cult” as a group with an egomaniacal leader and ego-deficient followers, one need not attend closely to the particular religious beliefs and practices of the group.²⁵

Ammerman pointed out that the FBI failed to take into account the apocalyptic religious beliefs of the Branch Davidians and ignored the advice of their own behavioral scientists, who said that aggressive tactical actions just confirmed the Branch Davidians’ apocalyptic interpretations of the events.

Instead of consulting scholarly experts on religious groups, the ATF and FBI relied on advice from Rick Ross, a deprogrammer, and utilized information about “cults” disseminated by the anti-cult organization called the Cult Awareness Network.²⁶ In addition to serving as an advisor to the ATF and FBI agents in 1993 about how to deal with the Branch Davidians, Rick Ross helped shape public perceptions of the case by giving several television interviews.²⁷

Rick Ross is not a religion scholar, and he has been linked to crimes. In 1975 he conspired to rob a jewelry shop. In 1991, Ross and two other men

were accused of kidnapping a member of a Pentecostal church in order to deprogram him. Rick Ross, the Cult Awareness Network, and the two other men were found liable in 1994 and ordered to pay punitive damages.²⁸ Rick Ross and the Cult Awareness Network subsequently filed for bankruptcy. The original Cult Awareness Network went out of business, but Rick Ross remained an outspoken anti-cultist seeking media attention.

The “cult” stereotype combined with the warfare mentality of the federal law enforcement agents²⁹ obscured the agents’ recognition that violence involving religious groups is interactive in nature, and that the quality of the interactions of outside actors with believers is crucial for determining a peaceful or violent outcome. The *Waco Tribune-Herald*’s “Sinful Messiah” series was the first to apply the “cult” stereotype to the Branch Davidians, and the newspaper was directly involved in the events leading to the disastrous ATF raid.

The “Sinful Messiah” Series in the *Waco Tribune-Herald*

The *Waco Tribune-Herald*’s “Sinful Messiah” series began its first installment on Saturday, February 27, 1993, and the second article was published on February 28, the day of the ATF raid. After the disaster on February 28, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* published parts 3-7 of the series on Monday, March 1 on the front page. The series was an initial source of information for the FBI agents and reporters arriving in Waco. Newspapers such as the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *New York Times*, *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune* either reprinted all or parts of the series or drew heavily on it for their own stories.³⁰

The Branch Davidians saw David Koresh as the messiah (“Christ,” or “anointed one”) figure described in Psalm 40:12 as being full of iniquities, or sinful. They understood this messiah to be the Son of God described in Psalm 45 as marrying virgins and having children by them who “become princes in all the earth.” Koresh identified himself as being this Christ and as being the rider on the white horse in the First Seal of Revelation (Rev. 6), who goes forth to conquer evil in the final apocalyptic events.³¹ David Koresh as the Christ was sinful, not perfect, in order to be an effective savior of sinful humanity.³² The “Sinful Messiah” series took the Branch Davidians’ theological concept of the sinful messiah as the agent of salvation and made it into a condemnation of a “cult leader.”

According to Tabor and Gallagher, the “Sinful Messiah” series, by perpetuating the “cult” stereotype, “promoted the agenda of the anti-cult activists while at the same time discounting or denying outright the seriousness and even religiousness of the Branch Davidians.”³³ The “Sinful Messiah” series, “[b]y providing the public with a convenient interpretive shorthand, the characterization of the community as a ‘cult,’ unfortunately

made it all too easy and attractive to deny Koresh and the other [Branch Davidians] their full and complex humanity.”³⁴

A dramatic story was behind the “Sinful Messiah” series written by Mark England and Darlene McCormick. The *Waco Tribune-Herald* and its owners, Cox Enterprises, had spent tens of thousands of dollars and dedicated months of investigative effort into researching and writing the series, possibly in the hope of winning a Pulitzer Prize for the newspaper. According to Wendell Rawls, this was why the *Waco Tribune-Herald* did not want the series to be preempted by the ATF raid. ATF agent Phillip Chojnacki met with publishers and editors at the *Waco Tribune-Herald* office on February 24, but they declined to promise to delay the story, citing concerns about the children at Mount Carmel and the public’s right to know.³⁵ On February 25, Bob Lott, the *Tribune-Herald*’s managing editor, wrote the editorial that would accompany the first installment, demanding that law enforcement agents do something quickly about Koresh’s activities.³⁶ Lott’s editorial along with part 1 of the series was published on Saturday, February 27. According to Rawls:

One suspects that what [Lott] really wanted was three days—three days of articles in the series before [the] anticipated ATF raid on Monday morning, March 1. Three days of articles like the above-the-fold, top-right, Page 1, copyrighted article with the headline that read: “THE LAW WATCHES, BUT HAS DONE LITTLE.”

One also suspects that when the raid came the newspaper would try to take credit for it. That seems to be one of the things that Pulitzer Prize juries appreciate: results.³⁷

The “Sinful Messiah” series painted a grim picture of life at Mount Carmel, alleging that abusive spankings of children, to the point of drawing blood, took place and that Koresh boasted of his sexual exploits with young girls. The most disturbing allegation was that he forced himself on a twelve-year-old girl when she resisted.³⁸ It should be noted that Texas social workers had investigated the Branch Davidians for child abuse and closed the case for lack of evidence. Child abuse does not come under the jurisdiction of federal authorities.

The series relied on allegations made by former Branch Davidians who were concerned about what was going on at Mount Carmel, interspersed with a few extremely unflattering quotations from David Koresh. Marc Breault (aged twenty-nine in 1993) had left Mount Carmel over concerns about Koresh’s sexual relations with girls and his 1989 teaching that all the women were Koresh’s wives. After the fire, Breault published *Inside the Cult* (1993) depicting himself as a “cult buster.” Breault stated that “my primary reason for trying to help is the children.”³⁹ Robyn Bunds (aged

twenty-three in 1993) was another important source for the series. She had had a child by Koresh and had successfully secured custody of the boy after Koresh had made efforts to keep him.⁴⁰

Part 1 of the series asked why anyone would join such a group. The former members answered that they had been subjected to “traditional mind-control techniques to entrap listeners” and that Koresh’s Bible study sessions were “spellbinding.” The myth of the mesmerizing charismatic leader casting his spell on intelligent people powerless to resist was perpetuated in part 2, which referred to Koresh’s influence as “eerie.” The stories referred to Koresh as a “cult leader” and the Branch Davidians as “cult members.” Part 1 concluded with a list of legal categories relating to sexual assault of children and was accompanied by an impassioned editorial by Bob Lott demanding that something be done to stop Koresh.

Part 3 was published after the ATF assault with a note by Bob Lott discussing the timing of the publication of the series and whether it had contributed to the deaths the previous day. He reported that federal agents had asked the *Tribune-Herald* to hold off publishing the series, but that because of concerns for the children they had decided it was “time to let the public know of this menace in our community.” Lott concluded: “I don’t agree with the tendency of some to point to our reporting as having affected Sunday’s tragedy. We share the anguish over what happened. Everyone involved or who saw it is devastated.”

In addition to testimony from a variety of former members, part 4 of the series introduced the voices of “cult experts” from the anti-cult movement asserting that David Koresh “controls the minds” of his followers in a “destructive cult.” Priscilla Coates of the Cult Awareness Network and Rick Ross were cited, depicting Koresh as practicing mind control, leaving the Branch Davidians “passive and obedient.”

In part 6, Jeannine Bunds, the mother of Robyn Bunds, gave an assessment of life at Mount Carmel untainted by the anti-cult movement:

I’m over 21, intelligent. I could have walked away at any time. I chose to stay. He doesn’t keep you. You can leave. What you have to understand, though, is he keeps you by emotion. When you’re down there, it’s all so exciting. You don’t know what he’ll come up with next. I guess everyone is looking for Utopia, Shangri-la. You don’t want any problems. It wasn’t all bad times, you know. The people in this are great. They’ll give you the shirt off their back. They’re nice, like everyone else in the world. Except they believe this.

But the overriding presentation of the Branch Davidians in the series was that they were a dangerous cult controlled by a manipulative cult leader exercising mind control. Over twenty disaffected former members (part 1) and self-styled “cult experts” were the main sources for the series. David

Koresh was interviewed several times by telephone⁴¹ and was cited as saying, “If the Bible is true, I’m Christ. But so what? What’s so great about being Christ? A man nailed to the cross. A man acquainted with grief.” And also: “If the Bible is true, I’m Christ. If the Bible is true. But all I want out of this is for people to be honest this time.”⁴² But the perspective of Koresh was only lightly represented, and often in an unflattering light.

On February 27, after part 1 of the series appeared, Steve Schneider, aged forty-one, called the *Waco Tribune-Herald* and invited Mark England and city editor Brian Blansette to Mount Carmel, so that Koresh could explain the Seven Seals of the book of Revelation to them. Clearly Koresh felt that a better knowledge of the biblical prophecies was necessary for them to understand his activities. Knowing that the raid was scheduled for February 28, they decided not to go.⁴³

The “Sinful Messiah” series would have been enhanced if the voices of faithful Branch Davidians and nondisaffected former members had been represented. The religious beliefs of the Branch Davidians were presented as bizarre, and therefore the perspectives of the Branch Davidians were seen as unworthy of serious consideration.

According to Tabor and Gallagher, “[t]he widespread failure to take the religious convictions of Koresh and the other Davidians seriously, signaled by the facile adoption of the term ‘cult,’ contributed directly to their deaths.”⁴⁴

Since “cults” represent a dangerous threat to the social order, it is necessary to oppose them with all the resources the state can muster, including tear gas, SWAT teams, and tanks. Since “cult leaders” are power-mad megalomaniacs, no one should lament their passing and they alone bear the blame for the deaths of their followers.⁴⁵

Lee Hancock’s Investigative Reporting

Lee Hancock of the *Dallas Morning News* produced consistently high-quality investigative stories on this case from 1993 to 2003. Hancock arrived at Mount Carmel at 1:30 p.m. on February 28, 1993; reported on the story throughout the siege; was present on April 19 and witnessed the fire; and covered the criminal trial in 1994, the congressional hearings in 1995, the trial of the wrongful-death civil suit brought by Branch Davidian survivors and relatives in 2000, and the Danforth investigation and report in 1999–2000.⁴⁶ Hancock reported thoroughly and intelligently on the complexities of the case and brought new information to light that prompted additional government investigations.

Hancock reported in 1999 that, contrary to FBI testimony before Congress that on April 19 no pyrotechnic devices (utilizing a spark) were used,

two pyrotechnic CS gas grenades were in fact fired at an underground tunnel.⁴⁷ This story led to Attorney General Janet Reno appointing former Senator John Danforth as special counsel to investigate whether the actions of federal agents at Mount Carmel on April 19 were appropriate.⁴⁸

Lee Hancock said that she was proudest of her stories that revealed the conflict within the FBI and between federal agencies about how best to deal with the Branch Davidians.⁴⁹ Indeed, she reported on FBI internal memos and Justice Department memos and interviews, which were not included in the Justice Department's 1993 report, which indicated that FBI negotiators protested the aggressive tactical actions against the Branch Davidians and predicted a tragic outcome if the tactical approach continued to be given precedence.⁵⁰ Negotiators asserted that their ability to establish trust with the Branch Davidians was undermined by the repeated physical punishments and psychological warfare inflicted on the Branch Davidians by the tactical team every time the Branch Davidians cooperated with the negotiators and adults started coming out.

Hancock reported on Justice Department interviews in which retired FBI behavioral scientist Pete Smerick said that he had warned in 1993 "that they should not send in the tanks, because if they did so, children would die." In 1993 Smerick wrote memos warning that an aggressive tactical approach would "draw David Koresh and his followers closer together in the 'bunker mentality' and they would rather die than surrender."⁵¹

FBI negotiators endorsed a plan to gas the residence gradually, because they hoped to restrain the tactical unit bent on aggressive action. Negotiators and behavioral experts were not consulted when the tactical commanders ordered the acceleration of the insertion of CS gas and the dismantling of the building by tanks. Now-retired FBI negotiator Gary Noesner said in 1993, "Any negotiator would have told them that dismantling the building would provoke a violent response." Noesner asserted that "it was a bad decision to start knocking down a building containing women and children because people could have been crushed."⁵²

Hancock's articles detailed how FBI tactical agents punished the Branch Davidians when adults came out of Mount Carmel. After two adults came out on March 12, special agent in charge Jeffrey Jamar ordered that the building's electricity be cut off. Two adults came out on March 19, seven others came out on March 21, and the negotiators believed that about twenty people would come out on March 22; but on March 21 FBI agents used the tanks to demolish the Branch Davidians' cars. Noesner reported that "[a] guy from the HRT [Hostage Rescue Team] said it was just to 'piss them off.'"⁵³

Noesner and another negotiator, Fred Lanceley, were recalled from Waco because of their disagreements with the tactical team. Lanceley

reported that in 1993 he said, "I want to get out of here, because all of these people in that compound are going to die, and I don't want to be here when it happens."⁵⁴

Hancock's reporting of the conflicts within the FBI indicated that agents were well aware of the likely violent outcome of a tactical assault on Mount Carmel. The tactical actions, which were known to counteract negotiations, called into question self-exculpatory statements of FBI agents after the fire. For instance, special agent in charge Jeffrey Jamar, speaking on CNN on April 20, put the blame squarely on David Koresh:

Those children are dead because David Koresh had them killed. There's no question about that. He had those fires started. He had 51 days to release those children. He chose those children to die. We didn't have anything to do with their deaths. Those fires were started in the compound by them. They were not allowed to leave, some of those who wanted to. We have inform—some evidence, again it's conclusive, there was gunfire when the fire started. There might have been people killed who were trying to get out of the compound.⁵⁵

Lee Hancock saw the conflict at Mount Carmel as a collision of groups possessing opposing worldviews, "a belief system about the way things are going to work,"⁵⁶ particularly between the Branch Davidians and law enforcement agents, but also the media and other actors in the drama. Hancock was proud that the reporting of the *Dallas Morning News* documented this conflict.

Hancock said that her overall aim in reporting about the Branch Davidian case was to bring to light information that was kept from the public by the government actors and to be an advocate for the story's complexity. She said that she had received criticism in the newsroom for including too many details, but she felt that this story in particular could not be encapsulated in simple terms. Hancock saw herself as advocating for the "other than the easy, pat explanation of what happened." Hancock aimed to represent all sides as fairly as she could without resorting to "white-hat/black-hat" dichotomized coverage. Hancock thought that sometimes "people need to be informed that there are no good guys and bad guys, that there are no easy answers."

According to Hancock, the increasing availability of information from 1993 to 2003 caused the master narrative of the story to shift. Initially, reporters saw the story as a murder case and police stand-off. Quickly it became a story about a police stand-off with weird religious nuts. Then it became a story of a conflict between a strange religious group and an overly aggressive law enforcement community. Lastly, it became a story of a misunderstood religious group in conflict with overreaching federal agents employing excessive force.

Hancock noted that constraints of time and resources limit reporters' ability to cover complex stories thoroughly. Her reporting on the events at Mount Carmel involved going back to the case again and again to dig up more facts. Hancock acknowledged that in 1993 reporters probably accepted too much of the federal agents' line about the case. She took a complex view of the case and the sources, acknowledging that "the government screwed up, and the government lied, and the government misrepresented some things, absolutely, and they should be held to a higher standard," and that the Branch Davidians continued to have a stake in presenting themselves to the public in certain ways, given everything that had happened and how they had been depicted in the media.

Early in its coverage of the Branch Davidians, the *Dallas Morning News* used the word "cult" in a pejorative sense, but Hancock said that as a result of educational efforts made by scholars giving interviews, she and many other reporters became more careful when writing about unconventional religions.

Hancock judges that the quality of the print reporting on the Branch Davidian case has been variable. Some reporting has been excellent, some bad; some "propaganda" has been "embraced as reporting," as when reporters "took as gospel" statements by either federal agents or Branch Davidians. Hancock pointed to an inherent problem in reporters tending to give greater credence to sources with whom they have had more contact.

The variable quality of reporting on the Branch Davidian case was manifested in the *Waco Tribune-Herald's* 2003 series entitled "Flashpoint in History."

"Flashpoint in History—10 Years after Mount Carmel"

In 2003 the *Waco Tribune-Herald* ran a second series on the tragedy in each Sunday issue from February 23 through April 13, culminating in a story on April 19, the tenth anniversary of the fire. The "Flashpoint in History" series made a concerted effort to include a variety of perspectives on the case. It contributed to humanizing the key players by including short vignettes of individuals, ranging from law enforcement agents and government officials to the surviving Branch Davidians. The series attempted to convey the complexities of the story and to humanize the actors in the drama. However, it made egregious errors in continuing to give a voice to spurious self-styled experts such as Rick Ross and in continuing to depict the Branch Davidians as crazy "cultists." The different perspectives expressed in this series indicated that different parties were continuing to contest the framing of the story. I am part of that contest, so I attempt here to report my role as self-reflexively as possible while stating my views. Law enforcement agents and their former advisors still have a stake in blaming

Koresh and the Branch Davidians. The surviving Branch Davidians have an obvious stake in humanizing themselves and their loved ones in the media and in protesting the government's actions against them.

The February 23, 2003, overview by Jason Embry stated that the "Branch Davidian saga was fraught with missteps on both sides." The article was accompanied by a statement by Carlos Sanchez, editor of the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, saying that the series intended to examine the legacy of the case for the city and the nation: "The problem, we quickly discovered, is that the events . . . left not only our community but our country with several different legacies, all complex and many still unclear." Sanchez wrote: "The siege at Mount Carmel . . . has left lingering questions in Waco and American culture about the role of law enforcement—both local and federal—as well as religion, government intervention, and the media." Sanchez suggested that "the debate itself may be Mount Carmel's enduring legacy."

There was also a statement in the February 23 issue from Bob Lott, the *Tribune-Herald* managing editor in 1993. He wrote that, in 1993, "[t]oo many died, and too needlessly: spellbound followers of a religious fanatic, recklessly led government men and the children, most horribly the innocent children." Lott praised the investigative reporting of Mark England and Darlene McCormick in the "Sinful Messiah" series and protested "the false accusations that [the] paper had contributed to the tragedy."

Terri Jo Ryan (part 2) focused on the history and beliefs of the Branch Davidians and the different perspectives on the story. Surviving Branch Davidians were interviewed, as well as several scholars including Stuart A. Wright and myself. Branch Davidian Clive Doyle addressed the issue of David Koresh's sexual relations with girls by giving the Branch Davidians' theological understanding: "We have had to wrestle with that, but we got to where we accepted it as God's instruction. If people couldn't accept it, they walked away. David believed God instructed him to produce children, that they were to be special children, that they would be there for judgment." I was quoted as saying that I saw the Branch Davidian tragedy as being a story about what happened to an unconventional religious group and about the abuses that arise out of the militarization of law enforcement.

I regard it as particularly unfortunate that the *Tribune-Herald* went back again to Rick Ross as a "cult expert." Ross's quoted remarks in part 2 about the surviving Branch Davidians were aimed at discrediting them. These were personal and insensitive attacks; I regard them as being extremely inappropriate in a news article. For instance, Ross was quoted as saying about Sheila Martin, who lost in the fire her husband, Douglas Wayne Martin, aged forty-two, and four of her children, Wayne Joseph (twenty), Anita (eighteen), Sheila (fifteen), and Lisa (thirteen):

And consider Sheila Martin. She lost a husband, the love of her life, the father of her children. She lost half her children and all of her friends in this horrible, horrible tragedy. All she sacrificed was for nothing—and who did she give this up for? A pedophile, a criminal of the worst sort, a man who raped a 10-year-old.

Ross discounted the significance of David Koresh's teachings for the Branch Davidians, calling them "theology-on-the-fly."

Generally this article by Terri Jo Ryan demonstrated a clumsy inability to negotiate the different perspectives of the Branch Davidians, scholars, and anti-cult "experts." I note that I never spoke directly with Terri Jo Ryan, but to her editor, whom I thought would write the story.

Tommy Witherspoon's article (part 3) on the Branch Davidian prisoners was informative. Of the Branch Davidians convicted, Ruth Riddle had completed her sentence and had been released. The seven men remaining in prison would be out in three to four years, but they would still be required to pay financial remuneration.

Mike Anderson's story (part 4) focused on federal and state agents and agencies. ATF and FBI agents articulated their view that blame rested solely on Koresh and the Branch Davidians. Retired ATF agent Bill Buford, aged fifty-eight, asserted that on February 28, 1993, Branch Davidians were firing machine guns as the agents got out of the cattle trailers. In response to the Treasury Department's report that in 1993 ATF officials lied to investigators and reporters, the ATF developed a new training program for agents stressing the importance of honesty and how to work with the media.

This story reported that after 1993 the ATF created four specially trained tactical teams for high-risk operations, and agents were more carefully trained in intelligence gathering and decision making. Since 1993 the ATF shifted from using "penetration-type" searches to plans where agents surround a site and call for the subjects to surrender. Director Bradley A. Buckles noted that the ATF had learned that tactics that work with criminals will probably not work when applied to religious believers.

This story included an interview with Byron Sage, aged fifty-five, styled as the FBI's lead negotiator during the siege in 1993. Sage reported that after 1993 the FBI formed the Critical Incident Response Group (CIRG) to put the negotiators and tactical officers under a coordinated command. Sage said that all CIRG members took a two-week negotiation class every year.

Bob Boyd of the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services was interviewed in part 4 on the child abuse allegations. Boyd explained that the department did nothing in 1993 in response to child abuse allegations, because the children they interviewed at Mount Carmel reported no abuse.

The FBI assault and the fire were addressed in this story. Clive Doyle reported that he knew of no plan for suicide and that he believed the Branch Davidians would be coming out once Koresh had completed his little book on the Seven Seals. Byron Sage asserted, however, that there was no evidence that Koresh was working on the book and that this claim was a delaying tactic. Sage asserted that the FBI agents had no control over the outcome at Mount Carmel:

The FBI never had any control over how this was going to end. From day one, that was up to Koresh. I think the only control law enforcement had over this was where and when it was going to end. But ultimately the ending was up to Koresh. He never relinquished that control right up to the fire that ultimately took the lives of those children.

Carl Hoover's article (part 5) surveyed the products of popular culture alluding to the Branch Davidian tragedy.

Mike Copeland's article entitled "Escaping the Stigma" (part 6) traced the concern of the citizens of Waco that the name of their city had become synonymous with the tragedy. The "Flashpoint in History" articles repeatedly pointed out that Mount Carmel was located ten miles east of Waco, near the small community of Elk, Texas.

Throughout the series, despite reporters' efforts to be neutral and to include all views, the Branch Davidians were discounted repeatedly as being "Apocalypse-obsessed"⁵⁷ or "Apocalypse-fixated" (part 6)—strange appellations in the middle of the Bible Belt—or as being "apocalyptic cult members" (part 8). Copeland's article amazingly characterized the events at Mount Carmel as being a "combustible episode." His prose distanced the Branch Davidians in terms of proximity and worldview:

Self-styled Davidian prophet David Koresh, 33, and his Apocalypse-fixated followers did not reside in Waco. They lived in a communal arrangement near the small city of Elk, 10 miles east of the city.

Copeland's article touched on the difference in the ways Americans viewed the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing (carried out by Timothy McVeigh and perhaps others in retaliation for the Branch Davidian deaths) and the victims of September 11, 2001. Oklahoma City Mayor Kirk Humphreys said, "I'm not sure Americans knew how to respond emotionally to the Davidians." Copeland's article concluded by putting the blame on David Koresh:

Even critics of law enforcement's handling of the siege note that Koresh was anything but an innocent victim. Much of what happened to the Davidians is rooted in Koresh's obsession with weaponry, his

sexual relations with under-age girls and his earlier shoot-out with a rival prophet at Mount Carmel.

J. B. Smith (part 7) focused on the children of Mount Carmel. Kevin Jones, aged twenty-one, remembered hiding with his brother under a blanket while the bullets flew through the walls during the ATF assault. He remembered hearing his grandfather, Perry Jones, screaming when he was shot and begging to be put out of his pain. Kevin Jones wondered why the ATF did not arrest Koresh on one of his trips into Waco.

Daniel Martin, aged sixteen, described Mount Carmel as an environment apart from video games and fast food and as having no indoor plumbing. He remembered that children were spanked, but did not recall ever feeling fearful: "I was always watching. I was always deep in thought. But I had fun. I was always happy."

Dr. Bruce Perry, a child psychiatrist who worked with the children who came out during the siege, said that he was not surprised to hear that the young people had fond memories of Mount Carmel. He stated that he believed that the environment possessed a twisted worldview without being physically abusive. Perry reported that when Attorney General Janet Reno initially justified the FBI assault by alleging child abuse, he reacted, "What is she talking about?" Reno had to retract that allegation. Perry stated in the "Flashpoint" article that there was no evidence of child abuse during the siege; nothing was going on inside Mount Carmel to justify the tank and CS gas assault.⁵⁸

A second article by Tommy Witherspoon (part 8) focused on the civil liberty issues. The adult Branch Davidians' attorney in the wrongful-death civil case, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, was quoted as saying:

I think it ought to be remembered always, painful as it is, because to me it represents the greatest tragedy in the history of the US domestic law enforcement, the greatest loss of life and the greatest failure of law enforcement to sensitively address a very difficult situation with the highest priority of securing life.

The article pointed out that in 1993, while federal agents were blasting high-decibel sounds at the Branch Davidians and shining bright spotlights at them all night long, Persian Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh was nearby watching and became the antigovernment activist who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168 people. Sociologist Stuart A. Wright was quoted as saying: "[Mount Carmel] was unprecedented in scope and consequence. I mean 86 people died in the whole thing. It's just unprecedented for law enforcement to be involved and for that many people to have been killed." Wright continued:

I've noted an amazing shift in public reaction since 1993. By 1999, when we learned of the pyrotechnic devices, polls showed 50 percent of Americans believed the FBI had screwed up or had a major hand in the tragic outcome. Compare that with polls right after [the incident] where 93 percent blamed the Davidians.

Witherspoon's article stated that many law enforcement officials "remain convinced that apocalyptic cult members set the fire themselves as part of a grand suicide pact." A paragraph seemed to suggest that the Branch Davidians got what they deserved because of their sexual practices, as if these justified the aggressive actions that resulted in the deaths of the children:

While Doyle and other followers say the Branch Davidians were peaceful people who merely wanted to study the Bible and mind their own business, DNA evidence revealed that at least a dozen of the 21 children who died in the fire were fathered by Koresh. Some of their mothers were underage girls.⁵⁹

"Prophesying about Waco" by Brian Gaar, dated April 19, 2003 (part 9), again characterized the Branch Davidians as "Apocalypse-obsessed followers" who "perished in a mysterious inferno." The article discussed how college students in 2003, even those nearby at Baylor University in Waco and at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, did not know what had happened at Mount Carmel in 1993. Much of the article was focused on citizens who were concerned that "Waco" had become "a household word, initially conjuring up gun-toting, Bible-quoting religious crazies." Bob Sheehy, who was mayor of Waco in 1993, expressed relief that the general public was starting to forget the association of the tragedy with the city. While Waco was planning a memorial to the 114 people who died in a tornado in 1947, Sheehy expressed opposition to any memorial at Mount Carmel. Two Baylor scholars expressed contrary views. Dr. Derek Davis said he would like to see a memorial at Mount Carmel, or a larger museum, to present information about what happened: "[I]t is something we want to remember as an important event concerning American religious freedom." Baylor sociologist Larry Lyon noted:

When Waco was mentioned eight years ago, 10 years ago, it meant crazy people. It used to be a place where people had strange interpretations of the Bible. Now it no longer means religious fanaticism. Now it's a place where the government overreached. It's a place where there are lessons to be learned.

The "Flashpoint in History" series made a genuine attempt to give a balanced treatment by including a variety of perspectives on the Branch Davidian tragedy. The diverse voices in the series indicated that the framing of

the story was still hotly contested, between Branch Davidians and law enforcement agents; between scholars and anti-cultists; and between citizens of Waco who wanted the world to forget the incident, Branch Davidians like Clive Doyle, who in part 9 asserted, "We're part of this community," and concerned Waco citizens and outsiders who believed a more elaborate memorial should be put on the site. In my opinion, it was extremely unprofessional to include the voice of a deprogrammer (a spurious profession) with a criminal record and no training in the study of religion as an "expert" on the Branch Davidians. The personal attacks that Rick Ross was permitted to launch in the pages of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* on surviving Branch Davidians were in extremely poor taste and did not reflect good reporting. The series' constant characterization of the Branch Davidians as "Apocalypse-obsessed" continued the discounting of the significance of their religious beliefs and humanity. The series came close to suggesting (part 8) that because of their sexual practices the Branch Davidians got a deserved outcome in the federal actions that resulted in the deaths of the innocents inside Mount Carmel. For the most part, Waco citizens expressed the wish that the rest of the world might realize that the Branch Davidians lived ten miles outside the city.

Branch Davidians and the Media in 2003

The surviving Branch Davidians who remained close to Mount Carmel—Catherine Matteson, Clive Doyle, Sheila Martin, and Bonnie Haldeman (who visited regularly)—continued to talk to the media through the years, realizing that they had a stake in humanizing themselves and their deceased loved ones in the public eye. However, by 2003, they felt they had been betrayed often by reporters, who came around pretending to be friendly and then left to depict them in a negative light. A significant instance of this was an article in *Texas Monthly*, "The Ghosts of Mount Carmel,"⁶⁰ which took a derisive tone toward the Branch Davidians. Even the article's photographs portrayed the Branch Davidians and interestingly, Byron Sage, as lonely, odd, and isolated, by depicting them individually and surrounded by a lot of space.

Yet the surviving Branch Davidians continued to give interviews. For instance, Bonnie Haldeman,⁶¹ David Koresh's mother, believed that media representatives were mainly looking for the sensational stories. She believed that some reporters were looking for the truth, but unless there was a sensational hook they were not going to pursue the story. She was aware that reporters were limited in what they could write: they were constrained by the perspectives of their editors. Haldeman chose not to speak much to reporters on the subject of Koresh's wives and children, admitting that she did not understand it fully, but saying that Koresh's reasons were

biblically based. Instead Haldeman chose to humanize them by regularly expressing her love for her deceased grandchildren, their mothers, and for her son, as well as for her friends who died in 1993. Haldeman hoped that, in the future, law enforcement personnel who were at Mount Carmel in 1993 would report what happened there. She felt that one day God would reveal the ultimate purpose of the deaths.

Promoting Contacts between Religion Scholars and Reporters

Contacts between religion scholars and reporters improved from 1993 to 2003. Scholarly professional associations reached out to reporters, and the Religion Newswriters Association took steps to put reporters in touch with bona fide scholars. Dart⁶² and Religion Newswriters Foundation⁶³ advised that it was important for reporters to consult credentialed experts and to avoid the use of pejorative terms such as "cult."

The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association, consisting mainly of sociologists of religion, since the 1980s had a scholar serving as publicity coordinator to reach out to reporters. Stuart Wright served in that capacity from 1989 to 2000. His goal was to make reporters more aware of the research being done by SSSR and RRA members, and he also made efforts to educate reporters about the problems with the "cult" and "brainwashing" stereotypes.⁶⁴ In 2003 Scott Thumma at Hartford Seminary served in this capacity.

In 1994 the American Academy of Religion formed the Committee on the Public Understanding of Religion, in great part as a response to the tragedy at Mount Carmel. As a member of the initial committee, I called the president of the Religion Newswriters Association and found that he had never heard of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), a nine-thousand-member professional association of scholars of religion, representing various disciplines and specialties. The AAR subsequently made efforts to make itself known to reporters needing experts on religion topics. A staff member at the AAR headquarters in Atlanta was designated to take calls from reporters and make recommendations about scholars.

In 2000 the AAR began giving awards to journalists for the Best In-Depth Reporting on Religion in three categories: news outlets with more than one hundred thousand circulation, news outlets with less than one hundred thousand circulation, and opinion writing.⁶⁵

In August 2002 the AAR, with funding from Pew Charitable Trusts, initiated Religionsource,⁶⁶ a database of five thousand religion scholars representing fourteen hundred areas of expertise. A reporter can go to the website and type in a key word to find relevant scholars. According to Kyle Cole, associate director of Religionsource, the AAR began its outreach to reporters in response to the Branch Davidian tragedy.⁶⁷

In August 2002, Pew Charitable Trusts provided funding for a service called ReligionLink from the Religion Newswriters Foundation, the educational arm of the Religion Newswriters Association. ReligionLink is edited by Diane Connolly, the former religion editor at the *Dallas Morning News*. Under her guidance the religion section of the *Dallas Morning News* won seven national awards for the nation's best secular newspaper religion section. ReligionLink's goal is to "help journalists write informed stories about the ways religion affects public life. It does not take sides on issues. It strives to treat all belief systems with respect and fairness and has no ties to any religious organization."⁶⁸ Its reporters anticipate possible upcoming news topics relating to religion, locate relevant experts, and send this information out by email to subscribers in free biweekly reports. Interested individuals can also access ReligionLink's archive on its website. According to Kimberly Winston,⁶⁹ a reporter with ReligionLink, there was a "mini-boom" in religion reporting after 1993, and now most newspapers have a reporter who covers religion at least part-time.

Debra Mason, the executive director of the Religion Newswriters Association, noted that many of the reporters who reported on the Branch Davidians in 1993 were general assignment reporters or crime reporters and were not religion newswriters, who would bring greater sensitivity to reporting on religious groups. According to Mason, ReligionLink's purpose is to give

[j]ournalists story ideas and sources, with the goal of improving the quality and depth of reporting about the intersection of religion and public life. It's intended to convince reporters and editors of the merits of these stories and to point journalists toward useful background. In the area of religion, which is fraught with many nuances and the easy potential for inaccuracy, ReligionLink serves as a model for journalists seeking to balance sources and provide adequate context.⁷⁰

The *Dallas Morning News* has demonstrated notable commitment to improving the quality of reporting on religion under the leadership of president and editor Robert Mong, who in 2004 acknowledged that in 1993 the *Dallas Morning News* did not properly integrate religion newswriters and news generalists in covering the events at Mount Carmel. Since 1993 the paper's Saturday religion section has been expanded, and in 2003 the newspaper had five religion newswriters, including Susan Hogan-Albach, winner of a 2002 AAR award for excellence in religion newswriting. The religion newswriters now serve as resources for the paper and work with general reporters on big stories, a model that bodes well for nuanced coverage of stories relating to religion.

Conclusion

Media representatives were actors in the drama in 1993 leading to the conflict at Mount Carmel that resulted in the deaths of four ATF agents and eighty Branch Davidians. There was a lot of behind-the-scenes activity as *Waco Tribune-Herald* and KWTX-TV reporters and photographers attempted to be in place to cover the ATF raid on February 28, resulting in the inadvertent tipping-off of the Branch Davidians. ATF commanders had the authority to call off the raid when they learned that the element of surprise was lost,⁷¹ but they did not. After the debacle on February 28, the media depicted the Branch Davidians as "cultists," dehumanizing the ordinary Branch Davidians by erasing them by focusing on depicting Koresh as a deranged and manipulative "cult leader" who brainwashed his followers.

After 1993, the FBI and other federal agents continued to have a stake in blaming Koresh and the adult Branch Davidians for what happened, and the surviving Branch Davidians had a stake in humanizing their community and seeking legal redress. Religion scholars and their professional associations became more proactive in making their expertise available to reporters. Reporters, especially in the print media, likewise took steps to improve religion reporting and to reach out to appropriate scholarly experts. Despite these efforts, however, anti-cultist entrepreneurs such as Rick Ross still had an impact on media treatments of new religions.

Gus Niebuhr,⁷² formerly a religion newswriter for the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and now an academic, pointed out that by 2003 reporting on new religions remained variable. It had improved in the print media in large urban centers, where reporters were more likely to attempt to avoid the easy label of "cult." But the problem was that very few reporters were committed to doing in-depth religion reporting. He pointed out that religion was not much addressed in schools of journalism. Young reporters, who did not have a memory of the Branch Davidian conflict and the subsequent scholarly and government inquiries, were more likely to perpetuate the old "cult" stereotype when writing about the Branch Davidians. Niebuhr saw the reporting of religion on television as being poor, with some notable exceptions. He advised that members of new religions could contribute to better news coverage of themselves by speaking with reporters. I note that the outcome is dependent on reporters approaching religious groups with open minds and without an underlying agenda of painting them as cultists.

The Branch Davidian story is multifaceted, with numerous actors and points of view. The framing of the story in the print media shifted from 1993 to 2003, from a simplistic "cult" mass-suicide perspective to questions

being raised about excessive force utilized by militarized law enforcement agencies.⁷³ There is still room for improvement in reporting about religions and especially new religions, but scholars and reporters are making efforts to collaborate in their joint pedagogical mission of research and informing the public.

The media are significant actors in events leading to episodes of violence involving religious groups. The media are not simply bystanders in these dramas.⁷⁴ Therefore, the stakes are high regarding whether or not media report on religious groups fairly, accurately, and in a nuanced manner. The media also have a crucial function in reporting on an American law enforcement establishment that remains heavily militarized. It is well that reporters, scholars, mental health experts, and law enforcement agents continue to cultivate reflexivity about our biases, values, and goals, so that we do not contribute to future scenarios in which there is unnecessary loss of life.

- 44 The address of this group is given as General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, 32 Crescent Street, Mountain Dale, New York 12763.
 45 <http://www.shepherds-rod-message.org>.
 46 T. Hibbert, *Before the Flames: Story of David Koresh and the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists* (New York: Seaburn Publishing, 1996). In TXC 2D216 there is a folder marked “Miscellaneous” that has some material that stems from the New York group. This includes a pamphlet “Only 144,000 Translated?” and a number of study sheets on such topics as “The Shepherd’s Rod in Prophecy” and “Elijah.”
 47 Adair also reports that “Winston Rose,” a New York Davidian, staked a claim to the prophetic office and claimed that he was Elijah. However, as far as one can tell, Rose’s claims fell upon deaf ears (“Interviews,” 80). It may be to this person that Adair is again referring when he later talks of someone in New York who claims to be “Solomon David” (“Interviews,” 199).
 48 Sidney Smith indicates that one of those looking to return has already bought a house in Waco (Green, Smith, and Smith 1, p. 11).
 49 The video is located in the Institute of Oral History at Baylor, not in the TXC.
 50 Green, Smith, and Smith 1, p.11.
 51 Adair, “Interviews,” 36–37.
 52 Adair, “Interviews,” 36–37.
 53 Adair, “Interviews,” 77, 80. Adair indicates that Norman Archer was a Davidian in Jamaica before leaving for the United States.
 54 There is good evidence, for example, though it has not been possible as yet to follow it up, that there is a small group based in Jerusalem.

Chapter Nine

- 1 J. R. Hall, “Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect: from Jonestown to Mt. Carmel,” in S. A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 205–35; C. Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000); J. T. Richardson, “Minority Religions and the Context of Violence: A Conflict/Interactionist Perspective,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 1 (2001): 103–33; D. G. Bromley and J. G. Melton, eds., *Cults, Religion and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
 2 Uncited factual information summarized in this chapter is drawn from my chapter on the Branch Davidians in Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, which contains full citations. I am deeply indebted to Lee Hancock for providing me with invaluable materials relating to this case. I am equally indebted to surviving Branch Davidians for granting me interviews: Catherine Matteson, Clive Doyle, Bonnie Haldeman, Sheila Martin, and Kimberly Martin. I also thank Brad Borst, Gustav Niebuhr, Kimberly Winston, and Lee Hancock for permitting me to interview them. I am grateful to Kyle Cole and Steve Herrick of the American Academy of Religion, Stuart Wright and Scott Thumma of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Debra Mason of the Religion Newswriters Association, and Robert Mong of the *Dallas Morning News* for their assistance. I greatly appreciate the comments I received from Lee Hancock, Stuart Wright, Rebecca Moore, Eugene Gallagher, and James

- T. Richardson on earlier drafts of this chapter. I thank Lonnie Davis and Claire Borowik for sending materials. I wish to thank Crawford Gribben and Gary L. Nebeker for reading and commenting on the text of this chapter.
 3 In 1993 the media framing of the Branch Davidians as “cultists” was based on several decades of depictions of new religions as “cults,” a stereotype applied to diverse groups (J. T. Richardson and B. van Driel, “Journalists’ Attitudes toward New Religious Movements,” *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 2 [1997], 116–36). The mass suicide-murders at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 solidified this stereotype that was used to characterize the Branch Davidians in 1993 (Hall, “Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect”). The consequence was that in 1993 most of the news coverage about the tragedy at Mount Carmel depicted the Branch Davidians as members of a “cult” that was solely responsible for the deaths. A poll by CNN/Gallup reported that 73 percent of Americans believed that the FBI decision to use CS gas on the residence was “responsible,” and 93 percent of Americans blamed the Branch Davidians’ leader, David Koresh, for the deaths (S. A. Wright, “Another View of the Mt. Carmel Standoff,” in Wright, *Armageddon in Waco*, xiii–xxvi, xv).
 4 D. Maxwell and C. Smith, Report of Investigation, Texas Department of Public Safety, Criminal Law Enforcement Division, May 11, 1993. A dispatcher for an ambulance company on standby for the ATF revealed that she tipped off Mulloney. Witherspoon did not reveal his source.
 5 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation.
 6 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation, §§54, 68.
 7 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation.
 8 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation.
 9 L. Hancock, personal communications, January 2004.
 10 V. Lowe, “FBI Uses Briefings as a Tactical Weapon,” *Dallas Morning News*, March 25, 1993.
 11 J. D. Tabor and P. Arnold, audiotape of discussion of biblical prophecies on the Ron Engleman radio talk show, April 1, 1993.
 12 House of Representatives, *Investigation into the Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies toward the Branch Davidians: Thirteenth Report by the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight Prepared in Conjunction with the Committee on the Judiciary together with Additional and Dissenting Views* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), 165.
 13 L. Hancock, “Agents Reach Settlement in Waco Court,” *Dallas Morning News*, October 18, 1996.
 14 E. S. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).
 15 J. T. Richardson, “Manufacturing Consent about Koresh: A Structural Analysis of the Role of the Media in the Waco Tragedy,” in Wright, *Armageddon in Waco*, 153–76, 155.
 16 Richardson and van Driel, “Journalists’ Attitudes toward New Religious Movements.”
 17 S. A. Wright, “Media Coverage of Unconventional Religions: Any ‘Good News’ for Minority Faiths?” *Review of Religious Research* 39, no. 2 (1997), 101–15).
 18 See, for instance, B. Edelman and J. T. Richardson, “Falun Gong and the Law: Development of Legal Social Control in China,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6, no. 2 (2003): 312–31.

- 19 J. T. Richardson, email dated August 25, 2003.
- 20 Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*, 73-74, 89, 106-12.
- 21 D. McCormick, "Howell's Mom Flees Home," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, March 2, 1993, 1-A.
- 22 B. Minutaglio and J. Weiss, "Divided Davidian," *Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 1993, 1, 11-A.
- 23 Branch Davidians, compilation of three unpublished videotapes of interviews made during the fifty-one-day siege (1993), a copy of which is in the author's possession.
- 24 In my analysis, Jonestown was a "fragile millennial movement" that initiated violence. The Branch Davidians were an "assaulted millennial movement" (Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*).
- 25 N. T. Ammerman, "Waco, Federal Law Enforcement, and Scholars of Religion," in Wright, *Armageddon in Waco*, 282-96, 285.
- 26 Ammerman, "Waco, Federal Law Enforcement," 286-89.
- 27 CNN News, March 2, 1993; NBC News *Today Show*, April 20, 1993.
- 28 *State of Arizona v. Rick Alan Ross; Jason Scott v. Rick Ross et al.*
- 29 S. A. Wright, "Explaining Militarization at Waco: The Construction and Convergence of the Warfare Narrative," in J. R. Lewis and J. A. Petersen, eds., *Controversial New Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 79-99; Ammerman, "Waco, Federal Law Enforcement, and Scholars of Religion," 286.
- 30 J. D. Tabor and E. V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 105, 118-19.
- 31 Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 57.
- 32 C. Matteson, interviewed August 15-17, 2003.
- 33 Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 117.
- 34 Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 118.
- 35 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation, §§121-22, 153, 186.
- 36 W. Rawls, "Debauchery at Waco: Print and Broadcast, National and Local, Journalism Displayed its Unseemly Side," *Nieman Reports*, Summer 1993, 12-15.
- 37 Rawls, "Debauchery at Waco," 14.
- 38 M. England and D. McCormick, "Sinful Messiah" series, *Waco Tribune-Herald*, February 27-March 1, 1993, <http://www.wacotrib.com/news/content/coxnet/branchdavidian/1993/>, part 1, part 4.
- 39 England and D. McCormick, "Sinful Messiah," part 1.
- 40 England and D. McCormick, "Sinful Messiah," part 6.
- 41 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation, §§182, 191.
- 42 England and McCormick, "Sinful Messiah," part 7.
- 43 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation, §187.
- 44 Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 118.
- 45 Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 118.
- 46 See also the following, all of which appeared in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 5, no. 1 (2001): S. A. Wright, "Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial," 143-51; J. T. Richardson, "'Showtime' in Texas: Social Productions of the Branch Davidian Trials," 152-70; J. E. Rosenfeld, "The Use of the Military at Waco: The Danforth Report in Context," 171-85.

- 47 L. Hancock, "2 Pyrotechnic Devices Fired at Davidians, Ex-official Says," *Dallas Morning News*, August 24, 1999.
- 48 See Rosenfeld, "The Use of the Military at Waco," on the Danforth report's limitations.
- 49 L. Hancock, interviewed September 26, 2003.
- 50 L. Hancock, "FBI Missteps Doomed Siege Talks, Memos Say," *Dallas Morning News*, December 30, 1999.
- 51 Hancock, "FBI Missteps."
- 52 Hancock, "FBI Missteps."
- 53 Hancock, "FBI Missteps."
- 54 Hancock, "FBI Missteps"; see also S. A. Wright, "A Decade after Waco: Reassessing Crisis Negotiations at Mt. Carmel in light of New Government Disclosures," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 2 (2003): 101-10.
- 55 Cable News Network, television broadcast, April 20, 1993.
- 56 L. Hancock, interviewed September 26, 2003.
- 57 *Waco Tribune-Herald*, "Flashpoint in History" series, parts 2 ("Church History," March 2, 2003), 4 ("Law Enforcement," March 16, 2003), 9 ("Prophecy-ing," April 19, 2003), and bio on Mike McNulty.
- 58 Perry's 2003 remarks differed in tone from his assertions in 1993 and 1995. Perry's 1995 congressional testimony stated that in addition to the girls being socialized for eventual sexual relationships with Koresh, the children were disciplined in abusive ways. His written report submitted to Congress said that the children lived in "an abusive and psychologically-destructive" environment. He also reported that he had protested the blaring of high-decibel sounds at Mount Carmel as harmful to the children. During the siege Dr. Perry advised FBI agents that the Branch Davidians had a belief system that made them capable of "abstract' suicide" and that the aggressive tactical actions made the Branch Davidians feel "under threat under siege, thereby making rational decision-making on the part of Koresh or the Davidians increasingly difficult." Dr. Perry's report stated that he did not know how the analysis he gave the FBI "was used (or misused)." Committee of the Judiciary, *Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies toward the Branch Davidians (Part I)*. Serial No. 72 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 214-16, 234-41, quotes on 241.
- 59 Part 8.
- 60 M. Hall, "The Ghosts of Mount Carmel," *Texas Monthly*, April 2003, 122-27, 132-38; photographs by Misty Keasler.
- 61 B. Haldeman, interviewed August 17, 2003.
- 62 J. Dart, *Deities and Deadlines: A Primer on Religion News Coverage*, 2d ed. (Nashville: First Amendment Center, 1998).
- 63 Religion Newswriters Foundation, *A Guide to Religion Reporting in the Secular Media: Frequently Asked Questions* (Westerville, Ohio: Religion Newswriters Foundation, 2002).
- 64 S. A. Wright, email message dated November 10, 2003.
- 65 "Journalists Honored for In-Depth Reporting on Religion," *Religious Studies News* 18, no. 4 (AAR ed., 2003): 12; American Academy of Religion, Awards for Best In-Depth Reporting on Religion, 2003, <http://www.aarweb.org/awards/journalism/default.asp>, accessed November 7, 2003.
- 66 Religionsource, <http://religionsource.org>, accessed November 12, 2003.

- 67 K. Cole remarks during a panel session, "Are We Public Educators: A Discussion with Journalists of Religion," Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Norfolk, Va., October 25, 2003.
- 68 ReligionLink, <http://www.religionwriters.com/public/tips/main.shtml>, accessed November 14, 2003.
- 69 K. Winston, interviewed August 7, 2003.
- 70 D. Mason, email dated November 14, 2003.
- 71 Maxwell and Smith, Report of Investigation, §75.
- 72 G. Niebuhr, interviewed September 4, 2003.
- 73 Television depictions still relied heavily on the "cult" stereotype. The thesis of the ABC *Primetime Witness* show *The Children of Waco*, produced by J. Dratt and J. L. Goldstone (New York: ABC News) that was broadcast on April 17, 2003 was that the children who came out of Mount Carmel during the siege knew that their parents were going to choose to die with David Koresh, and that therefore there was nothing FBI agents could have done to prevent the tragedy. Surviving Branch Davidians (Sheila Martin, interviewed August 16, 2003; Kimberly Martin, also interviewed August 16, 2003) noted that the young people remaining in Waco were not included on the show because their statements did not fit the agenda of the producers. The young people who were depicted on the show refused to accept retired FBI agent Byron Sage's characterization of their parents as being completely to blame, and asked about the responsibility of the federal agents. Brad Borst (age twenty-nine), who lived at Mount Carmel for five years with his mother and subsequently became a police officer, was particularly critical of the producer, Jude Dratt, who he said attempted to get the young people to make certain statements for the camera (B. Borst, press release, April 17, 2003, <http://www.anycities.com/mtcarmel/BradPress.htm>; Borst, Website, "The Facts about Waco," <http://www.wacofacts.com/>, accessed October 3, 2003; Borst, interviewed October 27, 2003).
- 74 Hall, "Public Narratives and the Apocalyptic Sect"; Wright, "Media Coverage of Unconventional Religions," 101–15; Richardson and van Driel, "Journalists' Attitudes toward New Religious Movements"; Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently*.

Chapter Ten

- 1 P. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), ix.
- 2 C. Gribben, "Left Behind and the Paradox of Evangelical Pessimism," p. 115 of this volume.
- 3 F. R. Coad, *Prophetic Developments with Particular Reference to the Early Brethren Movement* (Pinner, Middlesex: Christian Brethren Research Fellowship, 1966), 8.
- 4 Dispensationalism awaits a definitive history. See, however, C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995); A. D. Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1965); and, for an overview of the essential elements, J. S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between Old and New Testaments*.