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## Construction and Escalation of a Cult Threat

*Dissecting Moral Panic  
and Official Reaction to  
the Branch Davidians*

**A**n enormous and alarming concentration of resources—taxpayers' money, government personnel and time, not to mention many lives—were expended on the social problem allegedly taking place in Waco. According to news sources, the planned raid of the Mt. Carmel Davidians' property by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms was one of the largest civilian law enforcement actions in U.S. history. The initial operation involved approximately eighty federal agents, armed with semiautomatic and automatic

weapons, orchestrated to execute a single search and arrest warrant. After the failed siege, in which at least six sect members and four agents died in a gun battle, and the ensuing fifty-one-day standoff, in which an estimated seventy-four Davidians died in the fire, twenty-one of whom were children, the final toll included the tragic deaths of eighty-four people, and cost the taxpayers over 100 million dollars. By the end of the whole affair, an army in excess of 700 federal and state officials were involved in one capacity or another (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 2).

The cruelest irony of all is that it need never have happened in the first place. The U.S. Treasury Department report (1993), which reviewed the actions of BATF in Waco, later revealed gross errors of judgment by federal officials. Among other things, the agency failed to investigate sufficiently the possibility of serving the warrants to David Koresh while he was away from the church's property, thus avoiding the bloodshed altogether. BATF agents denied that Koresh had left the grounds in the preceding months before the raid, but the Treasury Department's report exposed this claim as a cover-up. In fact, the report details a number of false and misleading statements by senior BATF officials who engaged in a disinformation campaign after the failed siege in order to disguise their actions. There is now incontrovertible evidence that Koresh was aware of the BATF investigation. The Treasury Department report clearly documents the failure of BATF's undercover operation. Agents posing as students "did not fit the profile of . . . students," according to the report, and Koresh questioned neighbors about the agents and "expressed doubt that the men were students" (1993, 187). Another BATF agent posing as a UPS trainee elicited a harsher criticism by the report: "This undercover effort was so transparent that Koresh complained to the local sheriff's department" (1993, 188). Indeed, there is strong evidence that Koresh was made aware of the investigation by a gun dealer, Henry McMahon, seven months prior to the February 28 raid. Using McMahon as an intermediary, Koresh invited the special agent in charge of the case to visit the church's property and make an inspection of the weapons, which the agent declined (Smith 1993, 21A; McVicker 1993).

A careful analysis of the so-called problem posed by the Branch Davidians suggests one that is hardly proportional to the official reaction it prompted. Indeed, one of the most confounding questions that lingers from this lamentable episode in American history is why a relatively small, benign, unconventional religious sect in the rural farmlands of central Texas would evoke such a herculean response from authorities. Curiously, it appears that no attempts were made

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by the federal agents to secure less violent or more peaceable means of enforcing the law. The deployment of excessive force appears to be the only option ever considered by BATF, or what the Treasury Department report describes as "steps taken along what seemed at the time to be a preordained road" (1993, 174). The report's characterization seems quite accurate. But the reasons for the agency's actions are left unexplained.

It is clear now that many of the allegations and fears expressed by federal agents or reported by the media have little support and fail to provide a justification for the actions taken. Many of these allegations will be examined systematically in the course of the chapter. But even allowing that some of the accusations were true, such as the illegal weapons charges, conducting an elaborate, paramilitary assault without concerted efforts to consult with local law enforcement or consider less drastic options for executing the warrants, and without even attempting to communicate with the Davidians, requires explanation. In reviewing the documentation available through government reports and newspaper accounts, it now appears that BATF agents had already become convinced that the Davidians were a dangerous menace to society necessitating a swift and emphatic response. What the official reports or media accounts fail to explain are the sources, the dynamics, or the influences that contributed to the formulation of the problem in such an egregious manner.

In an effort to explain the marked discrepancy between the considerable problem actually posed by the Branch Davidians and the exaggerated perception of an insidious threat leading to massive official reaction, this paper offers a "constructionist" approach (Spector and Kitsuse 1987) or perspective regarding the recognition and identification of the Davidian sect as a social problem. Here I want to advance the thesis that the Mt. Carmel Davidians became caricatures of evil constructed through specific, but highly subjective, social processes of recognition, interpretation, and claims-making by pressure groups and detractors. In effect, how the sect came to be *defined* as dangerous or threatening to society is a product of social activities, less reflective of an objective condition than the symbolic meanings imposed upon the religious sect by others. In gaining the attention of authorities, a particular definition of the problem was legitimated and given official sanction.

#### Constructing Social Problems: Selection, Definition, Claims-making

It cannot be assumed that any social problem is self-evident. Many problems in society never get serious attention by authorities, while

others may get more than their share. This paradox is easily explained by constructionist theory as a process of selection, or selective recognition. In the initial stages of the AIDS epidemic, for example, the problem was generally ignored by government authorities under the Reagan administration because it was believed that the victims were largely homosexuals and IV drug users—disvalued social groups. On the other hand, the amount of attention given missing children who have been allegedly abducted by strangers appears to be greatly disproportionate to the actual figures, taking into account that most of these children are runaways or victims of custody battles between divorced or separated parents (Best 1990). Thus, the likelihood or degree of recognition of a problem may have no clear relation to the actual danger or threat posed to a society by a particular individual or group. Increasingly in recent decades, sociologists have come to appreciate the extent to which some social problems are selectively identified and symbolically defined.

By symbolic, I refer to the collective beliefs and meanings imputed to the actions or intentions of social groups or individuals. When the alleged problem represents a condition signifying a threat to the cherished norms or values of certain segments of society (Fuller and Myers 1941), when the particularistic moral order is challenged, a subjective definition may crystallize, finding shared indignation and consensual validation among select groups.

In this context, we find that collective action inevitably involves mobilizing ideas and meanings. Social actors engage in "meaning-work" (Snow and Benford 1992, 136), or what Hall (1982) call the "politics of signification," the struggle over the production of ideas and meanings. These productive efforts comprise an essential part of the core activities of social movements and moral crusades. According to Snow and Benford (1992, 136), such movements are not merely carriers of extant meanings but are "actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers."

A constructionist approach does not assume that a social problem can be taken at face value. It seeks to examine the social processes that lead to its definition by a social audience. There may be some debate among scholars as to whether an action can be inherently deviant or possess a known objective reality behind it (Lemert 1951; Spector and Kitsuse 1987; Rains 1975). It is not the purpose of this work to entertain that debate. What constructionism does make clear to our understanding of social problems, and particularly to the problem at hand, is that the official definition may not accurately reflect the situation or event.

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Another key component in the analysis of social problems is the issue of *claims-making*. Some problems in society receive attention largely because of organized efforts by pressure groups to spotlight or herald the perceived dangers of a group or phenomenon. According to Kitsuse and Schneider (1989, xii-xiii), "The theoretical task is to study how members define, lodge and press claims; how they publicize their concerns, redefine the issue in question in the face of political obstacles, indifference or opposition; how they enter into alliances with other claims-makers." Successful efforts may take on the features and characteristics of a symbolic crusade. Gusfield's (1963) analysis of the temperance movement in the nineteenth century suggests that elite groups, faced with declining power and status, supported temperance as a symbolic issue that would enable them to recover their dominant status and reassert their power. Similar arguments have been made with regard to the new religious right, and the antipornography and prolife movements (Wald et al. 1989, Zurcher and Kilpatrick 1976).

Claims-makers often engage in what Becker (1963) calls "moral enterprise." Such activities are designed to influence, create, or reconstitute a new fragment of the moral order and are carried out by "moral entrepreneurs," an increasingly significant source of influence in shaping value conflicts in a pluralistic society. Cultural heterogeneity in modern society precludes value consensus, giving rise to divergent and competing ideas, moral codes, and worldviews. Individuals or groups seeking to promote a particular set of values or moral beliefs work toward building a moral hegemony whereby dominant social institutions and public policy reflect their own ideals.

Claims-making is more effective if the particular issues target problems that reflect pre-existing or widespread social fears and apprehensions. Various studies of witch hunts or witch trials suggest that they occurred in the context of social turmoil, disorganization, or acute anomie (Erikson 1966; Karlsen 1987). Consequently, the claims find resonance with a larger social audience, receptive to and willing to support the definitions promoted by certain interest groups, such as those made by the Puritan clergy in colonial America during the Salem witch trials (Chambliss and Mankoff 1976; Moore 1987). History is replete with claims of fanaticism lodged against new sects by institutional religionists engendering conflict and giving birth to far-fetched plans for moral rectification. Though frequently representatives of "official" religion are articulating the conventional moral codes of the status quo, the claims-makers need not be religious, in any strict sense. In the last century, for example, critics cite a shift in moral entrepreneurship from religion to the

therapeutic and mental health communities (Gross 1978; London 1964; Reiff 1966; Szasz 1970a, 1970b, 1984).

According to Szasz (1970b), the purge of witches during the Inquisition served to heighten the scope of power held by the Medieval Church in much the same manner that clinical diagnoses of mental illness have been used by some to further the interests and power of mental health professionals. The "manufacture of madness" was an effective tool used by institutional psychiatrists during the McCarthy era to suppress socialist ideas (Szasz 1970b: 29), and even more insidious as a technique employed by the now dismantled Soviet state to punish political dissidents (Bloch and Reddaway 1977). Others have suggested that the widespread apprehension about youthful moorings and the growth of new or unconventional religions in recent years has given rise to a "cult scare," not unlike the witch hunts or Red scares of previous times (Bromley and Shupe 1981). The proliferation of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers who now specialize in cult deprogrammings, exit therapy, or counseling alleged survivors of satanic ritual abuse indicates the importance of interest groups in this phenomenon (Richardson, Bromley, and Best 1991).

#### The Role of Interest Groups

There are three critical areas of research in which an analysis of claims-making should focus (Best 1990; Gusfield 1963; Jenkins 1992). The first is the *interests* that particular groups or movement organizations and actors have in promoting a social problem. How or in what ways do these groups benefit or profit from promulgating a definition of an issue, lodging claims, and pressuring for an amelioration to the alleged crisis? These interests may be symbolic, material, or both. Interest groups may comprise individuals who perceive themselves as victims of some unjust system, group, or process. In this instance, the wronged victims invest themselves emotionally and psychologically in the cause so that it becomes analogous to a conversion experience. Often, the "convert" will embrace the cause with deep conviction and vigor, exhibiting the zeal of one involved in a religious crusade. Social movements are filled with activists or figures who attempt to turn their own misfortunes or bad experiences into moral or altruistic campaigns. For example, Candy Lightner, the founder of MADD whose daughter was killed by a drunk driver, used her personal tragedy to launch a career as an activist in the anti-drunk driving crusade (Nock and Kingston 1990). Similarly, Steven Hassan, an ex-Moonie, has been an outspoken activist in the

anticult movement, speaking at rallies and conferences, participating in deprogrammings, and eventually settling into a career as an exit counselor (Hassan 1988). Other members of these interest groups or movements may have similar personal experiences, or have family members who have been "victims," or simply be sympathetic to or aligned with the values and beliefs represented.

A second area of focus is the *resources* available to an interest group. A successful campaign or movement is often predicated on its ability to mobilize sufficient resources, particularly those external to the movement. Financial support from sympathetic publics, voluntary help to conduct routine activities, outside experts or consultants who lend advice or give direction, political contacts or networks, and alliances with other groups with common goals all may be considered important resources. The development of resource mobilization theory in social movements has contributed significantly to our understanding of how movements and interest groups succeed (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Zald and McCarthy 1979, 1987).

The third area of concern in analyzing interest groups is the *ownership* that they eventually secure over the issue or problem. In effect, ownership refers to the extent that society accepts their definition and evaluation of a problem as authoritative. Here the rhetoric or language invoked to "frame" the issue by interest groups or movement sectors serves as the dominant explanation or perspective (Snow et al. 1986). Conflicting interest groups will compete for ownership of a problem, attempting to gain larger shares of public support and eventually recognition by authorities. The conflicts over abortion between prolife and prochoice movement organizations reflect just such a struggle for ownership of the problem.

### Symbolic Politics, Deviance Amplification, and Moral Panic

Claims-makers may succeed in drawing attention to a special problem but fail to mobilize resources or force the actions of officials, particularly if the purported deviance is within a reasonable range of social tolerance. For example, moral crusades assailing pornography or homosexuality struggle to generate widespread public support because such deviations fall within the limits of tolerance in a democratic society. Issues of privacy or censorship prevent impulsive official reaction and defuse public outcry. Similarly, attacks on religious deviance are not likely to find a sympathetic audience because of the offsetting ethical concerns of free speech and freedom of religion.

Studies of moral or symbolic crusades, however, reveal that interest groups often circumvent this problem by engaging in what Jenk-

ins (1992, 10) calls the "politics of substitution." Since they are unable to attack a particular issue directly, they shift the focus to a more serious offense, essentially substituting a more deviant claim for a less deviant one. Thus Jenkins found that in Great Britain, interest groups that had been organized to fight pornography introduced children into their claims, alleging links between pornography and child sexual abuse. He observed that previously impotent moral campaigns against pornography gained widespread public support when coupled with child sexual abuse. While allegations of links between the two phenomena lacked any solid empirical evidence, the campaigns were nonetheless successful in creating moral panic and generating public demands for increased law enforcement efforts, new legislation, education programs in schools, counseling and treatment centers for victims, and a host of other activities. The moral panic surrounding child sexual abuse led many to believe that the problem was near epidemic proportions even though reliable statistics could not substantiate any significant increase in prevalence rates.

This process of deviance amplification or escalation is discussed in the work of Hall et al. (1978, 223), who describe it as a "self-amplifying sequence within the area of signification: the activity or event with which the signification deals is escalated—made to seem more threatening" than it actually is. By amplifying or escalating the general threat to society, the deviant activity or event crosses over the threshold of tolerance, incurring official sanctions. Deviance amplification is accomplished through "convergence," a rhetorical tactic linking two or more activities so as to implicitly or explicitly draw parallels between them (p. 223). "One kind of threat or challenge to society seems larger, more menacing," they state, "if it can be mapped together with other apparently similar phenomena—especially if by connecting one relatively harmless activity with a more threatening one, the danger implicit is made to appear more widespread and diffused" (1978, 226).

This theoretical framework is helpful in understanding how David Koresh and the Branch Davidians came to be defined as a serious threat to society, requiring elaborate government response. Reports of child abuse, sexual abuse, and preparations to attack the city of Waco with illegal weapons can be analyzed as claims-making activities of certain interest groups who, though frustrated in initial efforts to persuade authorities to act, effectively mapped together relatively harmless activities with more serious acts of deviance and illegality, thus pushing the putative actions over the threshold of tolerance.



### Interest Groups and Deviance Amplification in Waco

In the development of the alleged problem posed by the Branch Davidians in Waco, there appear to be at least three interest groups that helped shape the exaggerated and nefarious perception of Koresh and his followers: disgruntled apostates, the media, and anticult organizations. While there are certainly other players in this drama, the activities of these particular groups seem to be significant and can be readily documented and analyzed. Over time, and in varying degrees, these groups formed alliances to create, mutually reinforce, and help perpetuate a definition of Koresh and the Davidians as evil; they worked to gain the attention of government officials, and later served as advisors and sources of authority on the sect to federal agencies involved in the siege and the subsequent standoff.

#### *Disgruntled Apostates*

Atrocity tales about religious movements or organizations are commonly traced back to disgruntled apostates. Some famous historical examples include *Six Months in a Convent* by Rebecca Theresa Reed (1835), the *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* by Maria Monk (1836), *The History of the Saints, or, An Expose of Joe Smith and Mormonism* by John C. Bennett (1842), and the anti-Shaker work, *Portraiture of Shakerism*, by Mary Dyer (1822). All these works were inflated, scurrilous accounts giving alleged details and facts about events from former members (Lewis 1989; Miller 1983). Such "facts," however, tend to be less than objective when placed in the context of motives and circumstances of leaving. Apostates may leave under unfavorable conditions and voice their grievances as a form of retaliation.

Studies of defectors from new religious movements generally indicate favorable or sympathetic responses toward their former groups (Wright 1984, 1987, 1988; Wright and Ebaugh 1993), despite popular opinion to the contrary. Exceptions are most likely to include individuals who have been deprogrammed or participated in exit counseling (Lewis 1986; Solomon 1981; Wright 1987). Defectors who leave over doctrinal quarrels to form their own schismatic sects and those who have been expelled are also more likely to voice recriminations. Thus, while acrimonious accounts by former members are not typical, they are certainly not unprecedented either.

Several former Branch Davidians played a key role in the claim-making activities that provoked official reaction. But none was more significant than Marc Breault, a self-described "right-hand" man of Koresh, who defected in 1989. In a sensationalized account, pub-

lished shortly after the fatal fire, entitled *Inside the Cult*, he chronicles in great detail his efforts to gain the attention of authorities (Breault and King 1993). Breault's coauthor, Martin King, was the reporter for the Australian television show *A Current Affair* who attempted to expose Koresh tabloid-style in 1992. By his own account, Breault actively engaged in persuading Australian Davidians, particularly the Gent family, to defect. Curiously, Breault accomplished this task by claiming to be a rival prophet, challenging Koresh's leadership in the sect.

Not unlike other activists in interest groups or movements, Breault exhibited features of both victim and crusader. According to King, "Breault became a cultbuster. He committed his life to righting the wrongs of the past and, more importantly, to putting a stop to Vernon Howell before he could destroy many more lives" (Breault and King 1993, 208).

Breault boasts of a number of claims-making activities in order to provoke official reaction, including (1) flying to Waco to alert the police, (2) hiring a private investigator to gather damaging information on the sect, (3) approaching authorities in LaVerne, California, alleging statutory rape of young female adherents, (4) working with reporter King on the exposé, (5) contacting a sect member's estranged husband (David Jewell) and alleging sexual abuse of his daughter by Koresh, (6) serving as a witness in a custody battle over the sect member's daughter, and (7) contacting congressman Fred Upton of Michigan for assistance in gaining help from the FBI.

Largely as a result of this flurry of activity and lobbying, Breault was contacted by BATF special investigator Davy Aguilera in December 1992, approximately ten weeks before the raid, to obtain information about the Davidians (Breault and King 1993, 294). Breault became a primary source for the BATF and several other federal agencies. After the initial contact with the special investigator, Breault reports that he received "almost daily phone calls . . . (from) senior officials of the United States Government, which included the BATF, the FBI, Congress, the State Department, and the Texas Rangers" (1993, 295).

Other important apostates included the Bunds family, especially David and Debbie Bunds. David and Debbie Bunds were expelled from Mt. Carmel in June 1990 for violating dietary rules in the community. Soon after the expulsion, Breault contacted David Bunds and successfully "converted" him to "cultbusting" (1993, 218). Bunds subsequently persuaded his sister, Robyn, to defect and encouraged her to contact Breault. Robyn Bunds was reportedly one of Koresh's wives, and bore a child with him. Allegations lodged against Koresh

by Robyn in LaVerne, California, centered around a custody battle for the child. The claims of child abuse made against the Davidian leader appear to begin at this juncture. Eventually, a group of former members solidified under the leadership of Breault and continued to level complaints against Koresh to authorities both in California and Australia. Debbie Bunds was interviewed by special agent Aguilera and her testimony appears in the BATF affidavit accompanying the search warrant regarding the possession of illegal weapons. According to the affidavit, Ms. Bunds "observed Howell shooting a machinegun behind the main structure of the compound" in 1989 (U.S. District Court 1993, 10). Some comments from Ms. Bunds regarding Koresh's "exclusive sexual access to the women" (p. 10) also appear in the affidavit. Robyn and Marc Bunds (Robyn's half brother) are quoted extensively in the initial days following the failed BATF raid in news stories, and the Bunds family is generally credited by Breault as being instrumental in the federal investigation (1993, 297). Finally, at the trial of eleven Davidian survivors, four members of the Bunds family were called as witnesses for the prosecution.

One of the most bewildering questions regarding the BATF's decision to mount an assault ("dynamic entry") rather than pursue a more modest course of executing the warrants is answered in the Treasury Department investigation. According to the report, the BATF concluded that a request for Koresh to surrender would be futile. These conclusions were based solely on "intelligence obtained . . . from former cult members" (U.S. Treasury Department 1993, 141). This is further corroborated in a transcript of an interview with Breault conducted by a federal agent and reproduced in Breault and King (1993, 306-7).

BATF: If Vernon received a summons to answer questions regarding firearms, would he show up?

Breault: No way.

BATF: If the good guys came with a search warrant, would Vernon allow it?

Breault: If Vernon were not expecting it, no. If Vernon had prior warning, yes. He'd have time to shift all the firearms.

Breault goes on to assert that Koresh might kill others, order a mass suicide, or start his own holy war if approached by government officials. However, accounts by local law enforcement and authorities in Waco directly contradict claims by Breault and other defectors. McLennan County's sheriff's department reportedly had good relations with the Davidians, having had several opportunities to visit

Mt. Carmel without incident over the years. The former district attorney in Waco, Vic Feazell, reported no difficulty in obtaining the cooperation of the Davidians in a 1987 trial that ended in an acquittal of Koresh. Indeed, Feazell criticized the siege as "a vulgar display of power on the part of the feds" and stated that "if they'd [the BATF] called and talked to them, the Davidians would've given them what they wanted" (Bragg 1993, 7A).<sup>1</sup>

An equally perplexing question about the raid concerns the BATF's failure to consult or work more closely with local law enforcement, thus likely avoiding a standoff or bloodshed. This question also appears to be answered by apostate claims. The Australian defectors were exasperated at unsuccessful efforts to get Texas authorities to act against Koresh (Breault and King 1993, 231). King echoes the sentiments of the ex-Davidians: "The Sheriff's Department told us over the phone, and none too politely, that they knew all about the allegations but refused to discuss what action, if any, they planned to take. In a nut-shell, we got the cold shoulder" (1993, 288).

When the former sect members finally gained the attention of the BATF, they expressed acute frustrations about the perceived inaction of Waco law enforcement. In his role as cult-buster and BATF advisor, Breault apparently convinced federal agents that the local authorities in Waco could not be trusted. In an account of a conversation with another apostate, Breault implies that there is a leak in the sheriff's department, and claims that the BATF was "bypassing local authorities" three days before the raid (1993, 318). David Jewell, who worked with Breault to gain custody of his daughter in a court battle, reports in an AP news story that he was transported to and from Waco by the BATF "because there was a concern of [*sic*] the integrity of local law enforcement" (*Houston Chronicle*, October 11, 1993, 15A). The link between apostates' claims and the decision by the BATF to avoid collaboration with local law enforcement helps explain the steadfast resolve of federal agents to conduct a military-style raid in the manner of the "pre-ordained road" cited in the Treasury Department report.

#### *Media*

Two media sources played a critical role in the claims-making activities generating official reaction, an Australian television station and the *Waco Tribune-Herald*. By his own account, Breault's initial claims and pleas made to American authorities "fell on deaf ears" (1993, 13). Subsequently, he found a sympathetic listener in the Australian media, namely reporter King. The following account is given in the cobio-graphical narrative.

In the meantime, Marc Breault had given up on the authorities, so he went to the American media. . . . But, amazingly, Marc couldn't get the American media interested in this devil in their midst. Then he turned to Australian television . . . . The network knew a good story when it saw one. As a reporter for 'A Current Affair,' (Australia) I took up the challenge that was to dominate my life for the next two years. But how would we convince Vernon to be a willing participant in a television report, *the secret agenda of which was to expose him as a sex-crazed despot!* (1993, 256; emphasis mine)

Since the Davidians had churches in Australia and New Zealand, the media interest was fueled by local concern. As the allegations and claims-making grew, the journalist's investigation grew and extended to the United States and Waco. Breault and King give a detailed account of this development. Relying on Breault as a confidant and advisor, King conducted and filmed interviews with the Australian apostates in December 1991, and later with Koresh at Mt. Carmel in January 1992. An interview with Robyn Bunds was also conducted and filmed during the same visit. The filmed interviews were shown on the Australian television program *A Current Affair*, and stereotypically cast the Davidians as a "dangerous cult," lodging a litany of claims against Koresh, including child abuse, sexual promiscuity, and brainwashing.

It is difficult to know what kind of impact the media attention had on Koresh and the Davidians, in terms of their own perceptions. But there would appear to be a linkage between the sensational Australian media coverage and a chain of events leading to the increased signification of previous claims by apostates and responses by media and government in the United States. The Australian television station divided the program into a series that ran for four nights, April 15-18, 1992. Simultaneously, the *Herald Sun*, an Australian newspaper, covered the story in print. Not coincidentally, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* began its investigation of the Branch Davidians the following month, in May. The connection between Breault and *Waco Tribune-Herald* reporter Mark England is recounted in Breault's book. The seven-part series, "The Sinful Messiah," published by the *Waco* paper, relied heavily on Breault's own framing of events, exhibiting a striking similarity to the lurid paperback.

Government documents suggest that the BATF investigation of the Davidians began in late May or early June. In the affidavit accompanying the search warrant, agent Aguilera reports meeting with an officer in the McLennan County sheriff's department on June 4 (U.S. District Court 1993, 1). The text of the account implies that the

agent had earlier telephone conversations with the sheriff's department regarding a torn UPS package containing pineapple-type hand-grenade casings. The UPS incident was cited by BATF officials as the cause of the initial investigation. The affidavit states that the UPS information was received by the sheriff's department in May. However, against the backdrop of previously lodged claims by apostates, and further amplified by the Australian media coverage that filtered back to the States through video tapes, it is likely that the UPS incident was given much more serious attention by BATF than might otherwise have occurred. Both the BATF investigation and the *Waco Tribune-Herald* investigation began approximately one month after the Australian media coverage.

The Waco paper's investigative series, although largely just a recapitulation of apostate claims-making reproduced for American audiences, apparently had the effect of hurrying and perhaps competing with the BATF investigation. According to the editor, Bob Lott, the paper was prepared to publish the series a full month before the siege (Trousens 1993). Accounts by the *Tribune-Herald* and spokespersons for the BATF concur that federal agents requested a delay of the series publication. Though the paper agreed to postpone the series while the government proceeded with its operation, the editor eventually grew impatient and released the first part in the series the day before the raid. In the aftermath of the failed siege, a flurry of allegations by federal agents blamed the publicity generated by the *Tribune-Herald* for the adverse outcome (Fair and Bragg 1993: 1A). In Breault's book (1993, 301), he notes that the "BATF is becoming increasingly paranoid about the media" and specifically refers to the *Tribune-Herald*.

#### *Anticult Organizations*

The actions and goals of the anticult movement are well documented in the research literature (Bromley and Shupe 1979, 1987, 1993; Shupe and Bromley 1980, 1985). By definition, the anticult movement is a countermovement engaged in a symbolic campaign to defeat, or at least curtail, the growth and spread of unconventional religious groups or "cults." In recent years, a national coalition of discrete movement organizations has been forged under the umbrella organization Cult Awareness Network (CAN), formerly the Citizens Freedom Foundation. The involvement of CAN officials, anticult organizations, and deprogrammers in the Branch Davidian conflict is probably the least surprising and the most predictable element of the claims-making and social construction of the so-called cult problem in Waco.

The involvement of anticult movement actors can be traced to the

deprogramming of a former Branch Davidian, David Block, in the summer of 1992. According to a sworn affidavit, Block was deprogrammed by Rick Ross in the home of CAN national spokesperson, Priscilla Coates, in California (Ross and Green 1993). Deprogrammer Ross apparently obtained information from Block about stored weapons on the Davidian property. According to the Treasury report, much of the information about the weapons "was based almost exclusively on the statement of one former cult member, David Block" (1993, 143). In a review of the BATF's actions, the report criticizes the agency's "failure to consider how Block's relations with Koresh . . . might have affected the reliability of his statements" (p. 143), suggesting that the deprogrammed apostate may have been less than objective. The report also acknowledges Block's relationship with Rick Ross. The link between Ross and the BATF was confirmed by the deprogrammer himself on several occasions by news media shortly after the failed raid. Ross described himself as a "cult expert" and consultant to the BATF investigation (Robertson 1993). This is corroborated in Breault's account of the events leading up to the BATF raid (1993, 314). Breault initially learned of deprogrammer Ross from *Tribune-Herald* reporter Mark England. Cult-buster Breault subsequently recounted his efforts to contact Ross and referred to an intermediary who "has detailed information on cult awareness groups and cultbusters" (1993, 315). Breault also stated that Ross knew that "something was about to happen real soon" on February 16, and that Ross urged family members to "get Steve (Schneider) out as soon as possible" (1993, 317). Ross's apparent knowledge of the BATF raid twelve days before the event suggests more than a peripheral role as a government advisor.

In the first segment of "The Sinful Messiah" series published by the *Waco Tribune-Herald* on February 27, the day before the raid, reporters Mark England and Darlene McCormick acknowledged that they had information from interviews with more than twenty "former members" and quoted a man "deprogrammed" by Ross. Herein, the transmission of constructed meanings as "news" was accomplished. The language and rhetoric of apostate claims clearly regurgitated anticult framing and signification: "Former cult members also said Howell uses traditional mind-control techniques to entrap listeners" (England and McCormick 1993, 12A). Mind control and brainwashing attributions were pervasive throughout the series, reflecting the core concepts and ideology of the anticult movement.

An addendum to Nancy Ammerman's report to the Justice Department made evident the significance of deprogrammer Ross as an FBI advisor, describing him as "closely involved with both the

BATF and the FBI" and as having "the most extensive access to both agencies of any person on the 'cult expert' list" (Ammerman 1993). Ammerman's direct access (as a behavioral science expert) to government officials and nonpublic documents critical to the Waco catastrophe lends particular credence to the claim of the deprogrammer's influence (see also Ammerman, this volume).

In the House Judiciary Committee hearings following the Waco debacle, evidence surfaced that CAN had established regular contact with at least one congressman—apparently William Hughes of New Jersey—who subsequently supplied information about the Branch Davidians to the attorney general (Milne 1994, 141). Janet Reno confirmed that she had obtained this information involving the identification and use of "cult" advisors in the future, and indicated that she had a copy of an anticult article ("How Many Jonestowns Will It Take?"). Also, FBI special agent in charge at Waco, Jeffrey Jamar, stated in response to questioning that the bureau had been in possession of a "white paper" on cults prior to the Waco standoff and that they had found it "very useful" (Milne 1994, 142). The so-called white paper refers to a twelve-page document parroting anticult constructions of "harmful cult" characteristics, largely clinical in description and conspicuously void of contravening evidence or substantive empirical studies or references ("Cults" n.d.). Religious leaders are painted as manipulative, duplicitous, and even psychotic, while members are cast as victims of devious mind control techniques. To assert that the document is an objective treatment of marginal religious sects is akin to suggesting that Ku Klux Klan materials are dispassionate assessments of racial minorities. However, the white paper provides a helpful clue to the actions, or rather the *rationale* of such actions, taken by FBI agents. As a primer on "cults," the white paper may be seen as giving some explanation to the moral panic that federal law enforcement demonstrated so inexplicably on the grounds of Mt. Carmel.

### Conclusion

The argument has been advanced in this chapter that alliances and networks among key interest groups—apostates, media, and anticult organizations and actors—had a marked influence on the recognition, selection, and definition of the problem eventually adopted by federal authorities. The groups in question successfully achieved ownership of the problem, convincing government officials that they possessed the knowledge and expertise to define and explain the putative crisis at Mt. Carmel. Claims-making activities conducted in



concert by the key interest groups helped shape a unified and cohesive, albeit exaggerated, framing of the Branch Davidians as a cult threat, posing alleged dangers to sect members, children, and even citizens of Waco. By linking or mapping together less harmful activities (communal organization, charismatic authority, polygamy or sexual pluralism, millennial expectations) with more threatening ones (child abuse, sexual abuse, mental enslavement of members, or brainwashing, and preparations for launching an armed assault on the government<sup>2</sup>), antagonists were able to make benign activities appear to be more perilous and menacing. The extreme actions of excessive force by federal agents can best be understood in light of the processes of claims-making and deviance amplification, giving credence to official decisions that now, in retrospect, can only be described as tragically narrow and shortsighted.

### Notes

1. In an alarming and somewhat prophetic statement to the news media on March 2, 1993—six weeks before the FBI assault and tragic fire—former District Attorney Feazell said, "The Feds are preparing to kill them [noting the mobilization of military equipment into nearby staging areas]. That way they can bury their mistakes and they won't have attorneys looking over what they did later. . . . I'd represent these boys for free if they'd surrender without bloodshed, but I'm afraid I'm going to wake up and see the headlines that say they all died" (Bragg 1993, 7A).

2. This is precisely the claim made by the government in the trial of eleven Branch Davidians in San Antonio in early 1994. However, the jury was not convinced by government arguments, acquitting all of the sect members of charges of murder and conspiracy to murder. In effect, the jury rejected the claim that the Davidians conspired to provoke federal authorities into a gun battle and then ambushed the agents serving the warrants.

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