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# Explaining Militarization at Waco: The Construction and Convergence of the Warfare Narrative

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The Branch Davidians offer a legacy unique in modern American religious history. As a small religious sect that carved out a separatist lifestyle and community in the rural farmlands of central Texas, it gained the attention of federal authorities in the early 1990s, largely through the dogged actions of disgruntled apostates and allied interest groups, and eventually became the target of a disastrous federal siege that destroyed all but a remnant of the group. Significant historical, legal, and social science research has been devoted to analyzing the events surrounding the Waco tragedy (for example, Hall, 2002; Hall and Schuyler, 1998; Kopel and Blackman, 1997; Reavis, 1995; Tabor and Gallagher, 1995; Wright, 1995a, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). But one feature of this tragedy has yet to be fully explored or explained. I refer here to the martial logic by which the Branch Davidians came to be seen as such a perilous threat by the state that a massive paramilitary raid was required. Paramilitary raids by "special operations" units such as the one deployed at Mt. Carmel are usually reserved for terrorist groups or drug traffickers. The Davidians were neither. Yet the actions taken by federal law enforcement were tantamount to a counterterrorism strike, transforming Mt. Carmel Center into a battleground, a theater of war. In the aftermath of the initial raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), the incident was allowed to escalate into a final reckoning leading to the deaths of seventy-six men, women, and

children. The FBI determined after fifty-one days that negotiations had failed and launched a CS gas attack, breaching the Mt. Carmel complex with combat engineering vehicles and firing ferret rounds into the structure to force the barricaded sect members out. Six hours later, the building erupted into a fiery inferno that killed most of the residents.

One of the most confounding questions surrounding the Mt. Carmel incident is why a relatively small, benign religious sect would evoke such an aggressive and sustained military-like response from authorities. Investigations would later show that the ATF developed a grossly exaggerated perception of the Branch Davidians as an ominous threat to society and to themselves. As a result of this distorted perception, federal agents eschewed safer and less violent means of enforcement and chose to conduct a dangerous, high-risk "dynamic entry." In the formal review of the ATF's actions at Mt. Carmel by the U.S. Treasury Department months after the ill-fated raid, officials expressed dismay at decisions that put both agents and citizens in harm's way. The Treasury report notes that the ATF failed to consider fully its options and describes the planning of the operation as "steps taken along what seemed at the time to be a preordained road" (1993: 174). The report's characterization of this flawed planning process is telling, but the reasons for the agency's actions are left unexplained.

What is clear, however, is the degree to which the ATF perceived and overreacted to the alleged threat. The ATF paramilitary raid on the Branch Davidians constitutes the largest enforcement action ever taken by this storied agency. The dynamic entry by the ATF's Special Response Team was planned with military assistance by the U.S. Army Special Forces Rapid Support Unit at Ft. Hood in three days of training in close quarters combat exercises. The raid plan, given the code name "Operation Trojan Horse," involved eighty federal agents outfitted in camouflage and full combat gear, including Kevlar helmets and flak jackets; they wielded MP-5 submachine guns, semiautomatic AR-15s, Sig Sauer 9MM semiautomatic pistols, .308-caliber high-power sniper rifles, shotguns, and concussion grenades. The objective of the raid was to execute search and arrest warrants for Vernon Wayne Howell, the sect's leader who had changed his name to David Koresh, for firearms violations and possession of a destructive device. The Mt. Carmel complex housed approximately 130 people, about 70 percent of whom were women, children, and elderly persons. The failure by ATF to consider the reckless endangerment of residents who were not named in the warrants was an egregious miscalculation. As investigators later learned, the Davidians were tipped off about the raid by a Waco news cameraman who was trying to get to Mt. Carmel to cover the story. ATF undercover agent Robert Rodriguez was inside Mt. Carmel on the morning of February 28 when sect member David Jones arrived and informed Koresh about the impending raid. Rodriguez promptly departed the building, went immediately across the road to the surveillance house, told his superiors

that the element of surprise had been lost and advised that the raid be called off. ATF commanders Philip Chojnacki and Chuck Sarabyn ignored the agent's warning and proceeded with the raid. Accounts differ about who fired first, but a shootout ensued and six Branch Davidians and four federal agents were mortally wounded.

Subsequent investigations by congressional committees, scholars, and news organizations revealed that the initial ATF raid was imprudent and unnecessary. For example, one of the justifications for the raid given by ATF was predicated on the claim that David Koresh never left Mt. Carmel and thus could not be apprehended alone and away from the property. That claim proved to be false. In fact, Koresh left Mt. Carmel on a number of occasions during the two-month undercover and surveillance operation conducted by the Bureau, even jogging down Double E Ranch Road directly in front of the two undercover houses. The failure to apprehend Koresh was cited as a critical flaw in the final report by the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight and the Committee on the Judiciary which held hearings on the Waco incident in the summer of 1995: "David Koresh could have been arrested outside the Davidian compound. The ATF chose not to arrest Koresh outside the Davidian residence and instead was determined to use a dynamic entry approach. In making this decision, ATF agents exercised extremely poor judgement, made erroneous assumptions, and ignored the foreseeable perils or their course of action" (*Investigation*, 1996: 4).

The report went on to castigate the ATF for a "grossly incompetent" investigation, citing "an incredible number of false statements" in the affidavit accompanying the warrants, and for misrepresenting to Defense Department officials "that the Branch Davidians were involved in illegal drug manufacturing" in order to obtain military training and support (p. 4). The congressional report also made the damning observation that "The decision to pursue a military style raid was made more than 2 months *before surveillance, undercover, and infiltration efforts were begun*" (p. 4, emphasis added). This statement corroborates the Treasury Department report's observation that criticized the ATF raid plan as proceeding on a "preordained road." It appears that ATF officials were determined to conduct a raid irrespective of intelligence operations that showed Koresh could be apprehended away from Mt. Carmel or that the element of surprise had been lost only minutes before the incursion.

There is some evidence that the ATF insisted on a dynamic entry because it would create favorable news coverage just prior to budget and appropriations hearings in Washington. ATF Public Relations Officer Sharon Wheeler contacted media organizations in Waco and Dallas two days before the raid to inform them that "something big" was going to take place in Waco over the weekend. Wheeler had gathered a staff of public relations personnel in Waco prepared to send faxes and issue press releases in anticipation of a successful raid. This self-serving effort backfired, however, as one local news crew inad-

vertently tipped off the Davidians about the operation and ironically captured the only film footage of the bungled siege. The news crew also filmed the flight of National Guard helicopters circling Mt. Carmel just minutes before the raid party on the ground arrived, a fact that the ATF initially denied (because it could be asserted that the helicopters inadvertently alerted sect members to the impending raid). One of the most peculiar features of "Operation Trojan Horse" was the failure to ensure adequate emergency medical service or fire department backup, an essential component for a high-risk raid (McMains and Mullins, 1996: 325-326). Though ATF apparently had asked an EMS company to be on standby, raid officials had no means of contacting the unit once the operation disintegrated. The extraordinary care taken to provide news media with preraid information, contact persons and phone numbers, and presumably post-raid press releases and video coverage of the arrests, while failing to ensure lifesaving arrangements with the emergency medical service and the fire department, have led some to conclude that the ATF was seeking publicity through the raid. On March 10, 1993, while the outcome of the standoff was still in doubt and the revelations concerning the ATF's misdeeds were yet unknown to the public, ATF director Stephen Higgins told the House Appropriations Subcommittee, "the agency needs tighter laws and a national will-power against violent criminals who have arsenals and supplies of explosive" ("Tougher Rules Urged on Explosives, Guns," *Houston Chronicle*, March 11, 1993). Higgins also reminded the subcommittee that 60 percent of the bureau's work was enforcement of firearms laws.

Although publicity seeking may have contributed in part to the rationale for a raid, it does not fully provide an explanation for what was certainly a more complex process of decision making and planning. Research suggests that in the course of the investigation, the ATF garnered an exaggerated image of threat posed by the Davidians and became convinced that this inflated danger was real. The Branch Davidians were cast as a violent, apocalyptic "cult" that was preparing for a war with the government. The unprecedented size and scope of the ATF operation supports this contention. The affidavit accompanying the search and arrest warrants, though replete with factual errors, misstatements of law, and inflammatory information unrelated to the ATF's jurisdiction, methodically argues that the Davidians were amassing a stockpile of weapons and possibly bomb-making materials in preparation for Armageddon. David Thibodeau, a Branch Davidian survivor, later explained that the group was buying legal AR-15 semiautomatic rifles and devices used to turn them into automatic M-16s for a licensed gun dealer in the Waco area, Henry McMahon (Thibodeau and Whiteson, 1999: 128-129). McMahon intended to sell the popular automatic weapons for a significant profit before the guns became banned, and the Davidians saw this as an income-producing venture. However, McMahon "got nervous" after a compliance check by the ATF sometime in the summer of 1992, according to Thibodeau, and "canceled the contract, leaving

us with an inventory of unlicensed guns" (1999: 129). Technically, it was incumbent on the Davidians to apply for a federal license to purchase or convert automatic firearms, which they did not. But the Treasury report omits an important fact about the ATF compliance visit. Gun dealer Henry McMahon phoned Koresh during the compliance check and informed him of the ATF investigation, prompting Koresh to invite the agents to Mt. Carmel to inspect his firearms. McMahon testified under oath in the 1995 congressional hearings on Waco that he offered the phone to the ATF agents so that the federal inspectors could examine Mr. Koresh's guns. Curiously, the agents refused to speak to Koresh and never attempted to inspect the weapons prior to the February 28 raid. Koresh's attempt to cooperate with federal law enforcement was rebuffed. ATF officials later defended their actions, indicating that accepting such invitations violated normal investigative techniques. But the final congressional report on Waco rejected this explanation and concluded that the ATF had erred in their refusal to accept the invitation by Koresh. "It is unclear why the ATF did not accept the offer to conduct a compliance inspection of Koresh's firearms. What is clear is that the agents' refusal of Koresh's invitation was the first of a series of instances in which the ATF rejected opportunities to proceed in a non-confrontational manner. The agents' decision to decline Koresh's offer was a serious mistake" (*Investigation*, 1996: 13).

In order to understand fully the narrow and unyielding course of action taken by the ATF, it is necessary to examine how the Davidians came to be defined publically, in a carefully constructed narrative, as a violent cult bent on war. This public narrative was repeated time and again by federal officials and appropriated by the press and the larger public. The task of this study is to explore how this narrative developed and explain why it attained legitimacy. Building on earlier studies, I argue that a potent script emerged from a convergence of narratives among the cultural opponents of Koresh allied with public agencies that served to consolidate the mutual interests of both law enforcement and Davidian antagonists. In the emergent play of cultural meanings, an overarching "warfare" narrative was constructed that depicted the Davidians as an armed apocalyptic group preparing for a final battle with the Antichrist government forces. The convergence of narratives, in which the theme of "warfare" was central, helps explain the mentality of federal officials that led to excessive force demonstrated at Mt. Carmel. As such, it was not solely the weapons violations that moved federal officials to a full-blown paramilitary plan of assault to execute the warrants but also the imputed link of a "warfare" narrative to the firearms infractions that fueled an inflated sense of threat. Federal agents became convinced that the Davidians would not cooperate in an investigation, hated the federal government, were controlled by a fanatical cult leader, and would launch a "holy war" if challenged. This is readily apparent in the affidavit accompanying the warrants. What shapes and frames the "warrior cult" motif in the affidavit are the accounts by ex-members and de-

tractors who provided ATF agent Davy Aguilera with embellished descriptions of life at Mt. Carmel. Here one finds stories of armed sentries, paramilitary maneuvers and training, weapons stockpiles, "shoot-to-kill" orders regarding intruders, discussions of an imminent war, contingency plans for mass suicide, the group's purported hatred of the government and their contempt for gun laws, and Koresh's messianic claims (not to mention polygamy and the sect leader's conjugal unions with underage women). Without these lurid and dramatic tropes to magnify the alleged threat posed by the Davidians, it is questionable that the ATF would have taken such extreme measures. The most crucial mistake the agency made was to base part of its investigation on unreliable information generously supplied by adversaries and opponents of David Koresh who were engaged in a moral campaign to repudiate the sect leader and his movement. As I hope to show, disgruntled apostates teamed with anticult leaders and selected media to cast the Davidians as an evil and dangerous cult requiring a military-like intervention by authorities.

It may be argued, with good reason, that ATF officials were predisposed to believe these exaggerated claims because to do so served their own interests. The new Clinton administration, which took office in January 1993, was determined to push through tighter gun controls, making the ATF the greatest beneficiary of the new policies. Officials in the bureau were certainly aware of the changing political climate in Washington. Previous presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush were both card-carrying members of the National Rifle Association, a strong and vocal critic of the ATF. Neither president supported more restrictive gun legislation. The Clinton administration, on the other hand, subsequently lobbied Congress to pass the Brady Bill, which imposed a six-day minimum waiting period to purchase handguns, and the 1994 Federal Crime Bill, which outlawed seventeen types of assault weapons. Moreover, Bill Clinton had been the governor of Arkansas during the infamous federal siege of the violent Christian Identity group, the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord in his state in 1985 (Coulson and Shannon, 1999; Noble, 1998). It is possible that Clinton may have been seen by ATF officials as more sympathetic to a similar enforcement action eight years later in Waco as the new president took office. The affinity between the ATF's mission and the new administration's preference for reducing violent crime through heightened gun controls was clear. Given the timing of the raid, ATF director Higgins's statements to the House Appropriations Committee, the "grossly incompetent" investigation, the "incredible number of false statements" in the affidavit accompanying the warrants, the inordinate attention given to public relations while neglecting arrangements for emergency medical service backup prior to the raid, the decision to "pursue a military-style raid . . . more than 2 months before surveillance, undercover, and infiltration efforts were begun," and the ATF commanders' decision to proceed with the raid on the morning of Feb.

ruary 28 even after the element of surprise was lost, one can make a compelling case against the agency.

Equally important, however, was the emergent "warfare mentality" (Wagner-Pacifici, 1994) of law enforcement in the years leading up to the siege of Mt. Carmel. Numerous studies have documented the increased reliance of law enforcement on a "war model" of crime control (Dunn, 1996; Kraska, 1994, 1996, 2001a; Kraska and Kappeler, 1997; Skolnick and Fife, 1993; Walker, 1994). Alternatively referred to as a "military model" of crime control (Skolnick and Fife, 1993), this trend is rooted in the conceptualization of policing as a "war on crime." What these studies have shown is that the metaphor of war for crime fighting has been more than just a harmless construct; it has become a means by which official policies and practices have crystallized. For example, during the early years of the Reagan administration, in an effort to combat drug trafficking, Congress passed the Defense Authorization Act permitting military assistance in the "drug war." This law relaxed the historical separation between civilian police and the military, enacted in the Posse Comitatus Act after the Civil War. A series of laws were passed over the next decade that further eroded the line between domestic police and the military, all under the banner of the "war on crime and drugs." According to scholars, the effect of increased integration of police and military forces (joint task forces, coordinated assistance, interagency cooperation, weapons and technology transfer) has produced a "militarization of law enforcement" (Kraska and Kappeler, 1997). Within police culture, the attraction of military weaponry and training, the adoption of camouflage and military issue, close-order drill and military courtesy, the routinization of combat exercises (strike force operations, dynamic entries, reconnaissance, PSYOPS, urban warfare, close quarters combat) and the use of militarylike designations to replace traditional terms for police units (platoons, divisions, squads, details, chain-of-command) all point to such a transformation. The emergence of the war model of crime control also produced the inevitable "casualties of war," as evidenced particularly at Waco and Ruby Ridge (Dunn, 2001; Kraska and Kappeler, 1997), but also documented in various other, less public, incidents (Duke and Gross, 1993; Dunn, 1996; Kraska, 2001b; Miller, 1996; Wagner-Pacifici 1994). The deadly outcomes at Ruby Ridge and Waco—which were separated by only a few months and involved some of the same federal personnel—were a culmination of more than a decade of police militarization. By the time of the federal siege of Mt. Carmel, the warfare mentality was encoded so thoroughly into the culture of law enforcement that the planning, tactics, weaponry, and attitudes of the ATF Special Response Team and the FBI Hostage Rescue Team bore unmistakable marks of militarism.

### Warfare as Narrative Construction

Following the lead of John Hall, the following analysis relies on the study of "intrinsic narratives," defined as "the diverse stories that various social actors tell within emergent situations to which they are mutually oriented, but in different ways" (1995: 206). According to Hall, this approach can help to explain how "cultural meanings become nuanced, shaded, interpreted, challenged, and otherwise reworked by participants, and how such meaning shifts affect the course of unfolding events" (p. 206). Using this approach allows us to ascertain the importance of cultural narratives when affinities of meaning develop between groups. In a seminal study of the Waco tragedy, Hall analyzed how the narrative of mass suicide—appropriated from the 1978 Jonestown incident—was invoked and reworked in ways that shaped the escalating trajectory of conflict at Mt. Carmel. Even before the ATF raid or the fatal CS gas attack by the FBI, Hall observed, Waco was becoming "another Jonestown." Hall makes a persuasive argument that the cultural meanings about mass suicide were interwoven into narratives about Waco, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (see Hall, 1995, 2002). For the purposes of this study, Hall offers an important conceptual framework for analyzing how narrative convergence can produce a kind of rhetorical hegemony that pushes out competing explanations or understandings of events: "(N)arratives are particularly important when the meaningful content shifts, when the narrative moves from one source to another, when affinities develop between the narratives of two individuals or groups, and when the incorporation of a received narrative rearranges other meanings for an individual or group. When such narratives are freighted with cultural meanings, they may exercise influence on a course of events in ways that exceed or do not depend upon merely factual, legal, or professional considerations" (Hall 1995: 210). Indeed, when affinities develop between the narratives of groups, a common meaning and purpose may be found, alliances may be formed, and a dominant "cultural script" may be forged. I hope to show that one narrative promulgated by the cultural opponents of Koresh found particular resonance and legitimation among federal law enforcement agents, engendering a unified, refashioned single "warfare" narrative or script that served the interests of all parties and shaped the direction of the ATF investigation, the siege, and the standoff.

Elsewhere I have analyzed the social construction of a "cult" threat aimed at the Davidians and carried out in the form of a moral crusade by an alliance of disgruntled apostates, anticultists, and selected media (Wright, 1995b). The previous analysis focused largely on exaggerated threats constructed from cult stereotypes by allied detractors who emphasized "brainwashing," inflated claims of control or manipulation, and a litany of moral and sexual offenses. But further analysis suggests a distinct theme of warfare in the stories and



claims of allied opponents made to authorities. This theme deserves a closer look. I believe this is a critically important cultural script in the greater interplay of rhetorical meanings forged with the ATF investigators in the months and weeks before the raid.

### Warfare Narrative of Cultural Opponents

The early construction of a warfare narrative is apparent in the communication and claims-making activities of one key ex-member, Marc Breault. Breault's efforts are recorded in a scurrilous paperback entitled *Inside the Cult*, coauthored with a reporter for the tabloidlike TV program, "A Current Affair" (Breault and King, 1993). The blurbs appearing on the book cover trumpet claims of rape, beatings, "torturous rules of behavior," the threat of Koresh's "Mighty Men," training in military tactics and weaponry, and members' expectation of "the ultimate battle with the outside world." These are only exceeded by the sensational tropes contained within the book. Marc Breault is a principal figure in the construction of a warfare narrative and in the mobilization of an organized opposition against Koresh that fueled the fears of authorities. Though he had departed Mt. Carmel four years prior to the federal siege, Breault engaged in a flurry of claims-making activities—lobbying officials, networking with other ex-members, hiring a private investigator to collect damaging information about the sect, teaming with reporters in Australia and in Waco to scandalize Koresh—and eventually he became a primary source for the ATF and other federal agencies. Breault provides a record of these contacts prior to the raid, and boasts of almost daily phone calls from "senior officials of the United States Government, which included the ATF, the FBI, Congress, the State Department, and the Texas Rangers" (p. 295).

Breault claims that as early as 1988 the group began to post guards or sentries around the perimeter of Mt. Carmel and conduct "military training" (Breault and King, 1993: 178). The guards, he asserts, had shoot-to-kill orders regarding any suspicious intruders (p. 172). These claims are significant because they became part of the evidence record in support of the federal warrants. Indeed, Breault is named as the source for both the "shoot-to-kill" orders and the twenty-four-hour armed sentries cited by Special Agent Davy Aguilera in the ATF affidavit accompanying the warrants (U.S. District Court, 1993: 12). The details of the alleged military training and armed sentries at Mt. Carmel are vague, however, and Breault's story is conveyed through the eyes of a moral crusader, reconstructed from memories that appear to be heavily edited and generously sprinkled with aspersions. This problem is compounded by the fact that it is not clear which parts of the book are Breault's own account of events and which are King's recasting or retelling of the story. This muddled comingling of first-person and third-person voices leaves the reader confused

and makes the so-called eyewitness account even more ambiguous. In any case, the imaginative gest is replete with warfare and military themes that are significant in the eventual formation of the warrior cult image.

In one portion of the book, Breault describes an incident in which a Davidian, Wally Kennett, was standing guard at the entrance of Mt. Carmel and almost shot a newspaper delivery man, mistaking him for an uninvited intruder. According to Breault, "Suddenly there was a loud shout from the guard house, which was only about 20 yards from the bus in which I was sleeping" (p. 171). Breault claims the guard screamed "halt" and fired two shots into the air. "I could make out the shadow of the guard leveling his Ruger .223 rifle at a man," he writes (p. 172). The time of the incident was "5 A.M., still dark and dead quiet." Breault alleges that Kennett was acting on Koresh's shoot-to-kill orders. The story is continued with commentary, apparently by coauthor King, who writes, "You'd think gunshots at 5 A.M. would have everyone rushing from all directions. Incredibly, Marc Breault was the only person who investigated the disturbance" (p. 172). King chides "other cult members" for sleeping through this near tragedy and opines that everyone must have become "used to the sound of gun-fire at any hour of the day or night" (p. 173).

The account of this event, which is told to buttress the claims of round-the-clock armed guards and shoot-to-kill orders, has several critical flaws. First, the conditions under which Mr. Breault allegedly saw the incident occurred at 5 A.M., while it was "still dark." From an estimated distance of twenty yards, even those with good eyesight presumably would have had trouble making out "the shadow of the guard leveling his .223 Ruger rifle at a man." Marc Breault does not have average eyesight, however; he is legally blind. The Davidians I interviewed have been quick to point out that Mr. Breault could not read without holding printed materials up to his face; that he could not recognize people or objects even from a short distance away; and that many of the things he claimed to have seen were questionable because of his poor eyesight. Curiously, Breault and King avoid any discussion in the book of how Breault's blindness may have affected his credibility as a firsthand observer. More disturbingly, there is no mention of this fact by Special Agent Aguilera in the affidavit filed to obtain the search and arrest warrants. One might assume that a primary source for the ATF criminal investigation, leading to the securing of the warrants and authorization for the raid, would be thoroughly checked out with regard to his credibility. And in fact, it appears that Aguilera was aware of Mr. Breault's disability. Breault claims that he was flown to California on January 7, 1993, at ATF expense, and met face-to-face with Aguilera (pp. 303-304). At the meeting, Breault answered detailed questions about Koresh and the Davidians in discussions that lasted into the night of the seventh and continued the following day. The text of these discussions and descriptions of their conversations are reproduced in Breault's book (pp. 303-313). If Breault's account of this meeting is correct, it would be virtually impossible for the agent not to

recognize the disability. Mr. Breault's impairment is evident even to the most casual observer.

Another problem with this account is that the sect member in question, Wally Kennett, disputes Breault's story. In a 1993 interview, Kennett told me that Marc Breault was his roommate during part of his stay at Mt. Carmel and that he came to know the young Australian man pretty well. Kennett suggested that Marc Breault had "a tendency to tell tall tales," and gave several examples of embellished stories told him by Mr. Breault. In one unsolicited remark, Kennett stated, "The guy also claimed he had seen me level a Ruger mini fourteen at the paperboy's head at four o'clock in the morning when it was pitch dark" (Wright 1993a). Packaging these "tall tales" together, Kennett said of Breault, "this guy is full of crap" (ibid.). Kennett indicated that the members tolerated Breault's tendency to exaggerate because he was "a nice guy."

One prominent theme of warfare in the book is Breault's multiple references to the "Mighty Men," which he suggests was an elite security cadre designed to protect Koresh. Breault's disparaging characterization of the Mighty Men as "hand-picked goons who enforced Koresh's discipline" (p. 10), however, differs dramatically from the accounts of others who were at Mt. Carmel during this time. Davidian survivors generally have described the Mighty Men as a reference to spiritual qualifications, not martial qualities. The notion of Mighty Men stems from the biblical story of the guards of King Solomon's bed (Bromley and Silver, 1995: 62). David Thibodeau, who escaped the April 19 conflagration and later wrote his own biographical account, described the terminology in this way: "The term 'Mighty Men' came from King David's psalms. It was not a term for some inner core of armed guards protecting David, as some people later claimed. Actually, it could be applied to anyone who was given strength by faith, including women" (Thibodeau and Whiteson, 1999: 125). But Breault portrays the Mighty Men as Koresh's "most intimidating weapon" (p. 10) and suggests in another part of the book that he feared that when his disloyalty was discovered he might "be beaten to a pulp" by these guardians (p. 203). The latter statement is preceded by the observation that "the Branch Davidian cult was run like the Gestapo" (p. 202).

Breault also describes how David Koresh told his followers, "You've gotta be ready for war" after forcing them to watch a "marathon of violent Vietnam War movies" (p. 184). Breault infers that the "violent Vietnam War movies" served as de facto training videos. The movies to which he refers include such controversial films as *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. Breault's aversion to the dark side of the Vietnam war experience, however, may reveal more about his outsidership as an Australian than anything else. The movies identified were essentially a genre of anti-war films that exposed the ugliness of violence and war; they did not celebrate war or glorify the feats of American soldiers in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, he contends that the videos were part of a larger program of psychological conditioning for war, which "began at

dawn and continued all day until late at night." In this subversive atmosphere, he intones, "mind-control reached such a pitch that his subjects were putty in [Koresh's] hands" (p. 184). A few pages later, Breault remarks that "Mount Carmel was like an army base now" (p. 186). This image is reiterated in a remark about Koresh's "100-man army" (p. 250).

The theme of warfare is expanded to include the allegation of "terrorism" in latter segments of the book. Following the comment that Breault received almost daily phone calls from senior officials in the U.S. government, coauthor King remarks that "guns and terrorism were endemic" at Mt. Carmel (p. 295). Breault gives further support for the terrorism theme after learning from the ATF that they plan to conduct a raid. "Once they obtained warrants to conduct the raids, how were they to proceed? The Branch Davidians were not an ordinary group of criminals. They were religious zealots who would think nothing of dying for their leader. In many respects, they were like terrorists" (p. 297).

As the ATF intensified its operation, Breault was asked to provide "psychological profiles" of sect members, including "how much military training they had" (p. 298). Breault enthusiastically became an ATF operative and supplied federal agents with information about "the military history of cult members." Undaunted by the paltry number of veterans found ("several") among the 130 residents at Mt. Carmel, Breault cautioned that "David Jones, Vernon's brother-in-law and chief Mighty Man, is the biggest danger. He's a real crack shot and has taught others a lot" (pp. 300-301).

Breault's book is instructive in chronicling the organization and mobilization of apostates, families of members, journalists, anticultists, and government officials. These facts are corroborated by other sources. Davidian survivor David Thibodeau describes Breault's pivotal role in spearheading an organized campaign against Koresh in his autobiographical account (see Thibodeau and Whiteson, 1999: 54, 119-122). Other Davidian survivors I have interviewed (Catherine Matteson, Rita Riddle, Sheila Martin, Clive Doyle, Wally Kennett) have provided similar observations. These sentiments might be summarized in the words of long-time Davidian Catherine Matteson: "Well, that man [Breault] started it all. He started all our problems. He started them about three years before we had any contact with the government in any way. . . . And I personally hold him totally responsible, because without him then we never would have had any problems" (Wright 1993b).

The Treasury Department report documents Agent Aguilera's contacts with Breault "which continued until the ATF raid on February 28" (1993: 29). The allegations of armed guards and "shoot-to-kill" orders are attributed to Breault, as are claims that "many cult members carried firearms, including AK-47s" and the episode of Kennett's alleged shooting at the newspaper delivery man (p. 29). The report also links Breault to reporter Mark England of the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, the paper that ran a sordid six-part series about Koresh entitled "The Sinful Messiah" just prior to the raid. Accounts by other ex-

members who joined with Breault are also mentioned prominently in the report (Robyn Bunds, Janine Bunds, Debbie Bunds, Lisa and Bruce Gent). The report also makes reference to deprogrammed ex-member David Block, whom Breault tracked down at the behest of ATF (Breault and King, 1993: 310), and Block's deprogrammer, Rick Ross (U.S. Department of Treasury, 1993: 32, 1443-1444), an outspoken anticult activist. As stated earlier, the ATF affidavit cites Breault as a source (p. 12), and records interviews with ex-members Robyn Bunds, Debbie Bunds, Janine Bunds, David Block, and others. The *Waco Tribune-Herald's* investigative series cites interviews with the same organized opponents, and Breault is the primary source. These interconnections among disgruntled apostates, anticult organizations, and media have been documented in greater detail in a previous work (see Wright, 1995b).

#### The Warfare Narrative of Federal Law Enforcement

The ATF developed an exaggerated martial image of the Davidians as a violent cult bent on war with the government. But this image did not develop in a vacuum. It appears that the atrocity tales of apostates, taken largely at face value by investigators in the course of the interviews, helped give substance and shape to a refashioned warfare narrative. This narrative features prominent aspects of the "received" narrative of Koresh's opponents and incorporates the "warfare mentality" of law enforcement that developed within police culture during the previous decade. Indeed, the receptiveness of the ATF to the warfare narrative of Koresh's opponents was probably due to its strong affinity with the "war" model of crime control. As such, ATF investigators framed the information they received to fit the narrative of warfare, causing them to overlook or ignore contradictory, conflicting, or ambivalent evidence. This explains the puzzling decisions by ATF officials who failed to consider less lethal options or opportunities as they arose in what the Treasury report referred to as "steps taken along what seemed at the time to be a preordained road."

One example of how reliance on the received narrative of Koresh's opponents was used by the ATF to shunt the law and justify the raid can be seen in the following case. According to the final congressional report, the ATF lacked evidence for probable cause to obtain a warrant in December 1992 (p. 11). In order to gain more evidence, director Stephen Higgins directed the ATF to initiate the undercover and surveillance operation (U.S. Department of Treasury, 1993: 27-28). The congressional report notes that "no additional evidence of criminal activity" was produced in the undercover and surveillance operation, but it records that "Former Davidians were interviewed in December 1992 and January 1993" (p. 11), implying that additional evidence came from the interview material with ex-members. During this same period, interviews were also obtained from oppositional allies. The problem here is that much of the

material appearing in the affidavit is specious, inflammatory, and fails to consider the reliability of the sources. For example, the affidavit cites an interview with Joyce Sparks, a social worker with the Texas Department of Human Services, who "received a complaint from outside the State of Texas that David Koresh was operating a commune type compound and that he was sexually abusing young girls" (p. 7). The source of this complaint "outside Texas" was Marc Breault, as records later show. Agent Aguilera proceeds to describe an interview with Ms. Sparks, who interviewed "a young boy about 7 or 8 years old" (p. 8). The boy reportedly said he was in a hurry to grow up so he could "get a 'long gun' just like all the other men there" (p. 8). The boy also volunteered that "all the adults had guns and they were always practicing with them."

The inclusion of this material in the affidavit is problematic for several reasons. First, the affidavit makes no mention of the fact that the Texas Department of Human Services investigated the allegations of sexual abuse and eventually dismissed the case for lack of evidence. Second, the material alleging sexual abuse does not belong in the affidavit in the first place because the ATF has no legal jurisdiction over sex abuse; it is a state matter. The material is inflammatory and irrelevant and is clearly intended to inflate the putative threat posed by Koresh. Third, no consideration is given to the fact that the boy telling this story is seven or eight years old and may have had a healthy imagination, or at least exaggerated parts of his story; or that Spark's interpretation of the boy's story lacks detail and context. Ex-Davidian David Thibodeau, in his autobiographical account, has indicated that although everyone at Mt. Carmel was expected to be able to handle a gun, many of the members had an aversion for them: "For most of us," he states, "weapons were something we stayed away from as much as possible" (1999: 126). Finally, what is the criminal violation alleged by the agent in the telling of this story? There is no technical violation of firearms law cited, only the implication that Mt. Carmel is an armed "compound," with the tropes of the apostates to bridge the logical leap in the construction of the warfare narrative.

Agent Aguilera offers as further evidence in the affidavit—not of criminal activity but of the warfare narrative—the presence of "clandestine magazines" at Mt. Carmel such as *Shotgun News*; this was according to deprogrammed ex-member David Block (p. 14). No other "related clandestine magazines" mentioned in the affidavit are identified by title, though Block alleges that he "heard extensive talk of the existence of the 'Anarchist Cook Book'" (p. 14). Once again, this material is problematic. The characterization of *Shotgun News* as "clandestine" is misleading and disingenuous. The magazine has a circulation of about 165,000, and its readership is largely recreational hunters and gun collectors. Yet there is a clear intent to communicate the warfare image through the manipulation of language, as illustrated in the use of the word "clandestine." *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (2nd ed.) defines clandestine as "secret, hidden, withdrawn from public view; generally implying craft

deception or illicit purpose." Further manipulation of language to convey warfare, or what Wagner-Pacifici calls a "discourse of war," can be found in the repeated references to Mt. Carmel Center as a "compound." ATF's request to the military for assistance in serving the federal search warrant refers to the Davidians as "a dangerous, extremist organization" (*Investigation*, 1996: 46n), a term often applied to terrorists. The affidavit also contains the references supplied by Marc Breault's interview to "armed guards," "military training," and "shoot-to-kill orders" (military rules of engagement) cited previously. Packaged together with the equivocal description of "talk" about the "existence" of a book (*Anarchist Cookbook*), which deprogrammed ex-member Block never actually saw, the federal agents effectively convey the "message" they want to send.

Elsewhere in the affidavit, agent Aguilera describes an interview with one female ex-member, Deborah Bunds, who surmised that gunfire she heard while at Mt. Carmel was machine-gunfire. "She is sure the firearm was a machinegun because of the rapid rate of fire," the agent states (p. 10). Yet no information is provided by the agent to explain why this young woman is qualified to make such a judgment. A "rapid rate of fire" does not necessarily indicate that a firearm is a machine gun. Some semiautomatic weapons, as the Treasury Report later noted, may be equipped with a legal "hell-fire trigger" that enables "a semiautomatic weapon to be fired more quickly," a device of which Koresh was aware (1993: 35n). Another female ex-member, Janine Bunds, claimed to have identified an AR-15 from a photograph shown to her, but the same criticism applies—the qualifications of this witness to make such an assessment are unknown. The congressional report recognized the problem in using these witnesses to corroborate a technical issue of weapons violations, stating that "the affidavit included misleading . . . statements, . . . and failed to properly qualify witnesses' testimony when obviously called for based on their backgrounds" (p. 12).

Moreover, both of these women had been away from Mt. Carmel Center for an extended period of time. This raises another critical point. The congressional report chides the ATF on a point of law—that the events described by former members occurred more than a year earlier, making the evidence "so stale as to be of little or no value" (p. 11). Indeed, Marc Breault had departed four years earlier and the women had left in 1991. It is reasonable to assume that federal officials in ATF were aware, or should have been aware, of the legal principle of stale evidence. Constitutional law scholar Edward Gaffney has expressed unease with the ATF search warrant because "information submitted to a magistrate must be based on recent information that supports the conclusion that the item sought in a search warrant is probably still in the place to be searched" (Gaffney, 1995: 337). Did the ATF consider the staleness and, hence, unreliability of the evidence it offered in support of the warrants? This was the basis of a criticism made by the Treasury report, which faulted the ATF

for relying on information supplied by deprogrammed ex-member David Block because it was stale: "Nor did the planners pay appropriate attention to the fact that Block had left the Compound over six months earlier" (p. 144). Block had given the ATF raid planners faulty information about where the weapons were stored.

The most blatant example of ATF's predisposition to a warfare mentality is found in the false claim of a drug nexus that allowed the Bureau to secure military training and assistance in the raid. The ATF alleged to the Department of Defense for the purposes of obtaining military assistance that it had evidence of an "active methamphetamine lab" on the Mt. Carmel property. According to the McClennan County Sheriff's Department, Koresh found methamphetamine lab equipment upon taking possession of Mt. Carmel in 1988 and reported it to authorities. An associate of the previous occupant, George Roden, was responsible for the drug lab equipment. The Sheriff's Department investigated the incident and removed the equipment. But at the behest of ATF, Marc Breault sent a fax to Special Agent Aguilera implying that the lab might still be operational, stating ambiguously that one person present at Mt. Carmel during the sheriff's visit "did not personally observe" removal of the drug lab equipment. The evidence for a drug nexus claimed by ATF was based largely on this deceptive and fabricated tip. The final congressional report concluded that "ATF agents misrepresented to Defense Department officials that the Branch Davidians were involved in illegal drug manufacturing" (p. 3) and exposed the deception in some detail (see pp. 45-46). Indeed, there was never any evidence of drug manufacturing or trafficking by the Davidians, and the building in which the lab equipment was found in 1988 burned to the ground in 1990, three years before the ATF raid.

The allegation of a drug nexus by ATF was imperative in order to obtain military assistance legally and without reimbursement. In the War on Drugs, Congress has created provisions for military assistance in drug interdiction on the basis that drug trafficking constitutes a national security threat. These provisions allow for an integration of civilian police and military forces. That the ATF knowingly fabricated a drug nexus to secure military training and assistance in the planning and execution of the raid on Mt. Carmel supports the contention of a predisposition to a warfare mentality. According to the congressional report, Marc Breault's fax to agent Aguilera included information that would have dispelled the drug lab claim (p. 45). But the ATF omitted this information and did not communicate contravening evidence to the military. On the contrary, ATF became engaged in an ongoing program of misrepresentation, requiring a series of fraudulent claims to Department of Defense officials and the Texas National Guard. In this regard, the agency's actions indicate an independent decision and preference to pursue a military-like response. This independent course of action is suggestive of an emergent law enforcement culture that views police as "soldiers" in a war against crime and



drugs, and contributes to what Skolnick and Fife (1993: 16) call a "siege mentality" engendering such incidents of lethal and excessive force. ATF vigorously sought counterdrug military assistance through Operation Alliance, which acts as the clearinghouse for requests in drug interdiction along the Southwest border. The ATF's proclivity toward militarization is most evident in the frequency with which it makes counterdrug military assistance requests. Through fiscal year 1989, the ATF had initiated 232 requests to Operation Alliance for military assistance (*Investigation*, 1996: 35). As stated earlier, the trend of police militarization is well documented, as is its vital connection to the drug war, where law enforcement has been given the greatest latitude in acquiring military support (Kraska, 1994). The linkage of the Waco tragedy to a militarized police culture was not lost on the congressional investigators, who concluded that "the ATF was *predisposed* to using aggressive military tactics in an attempt to serve the arrest and search warrant. . . . The bias toward the use of force," they asserted, "may in large part be explained by a culture within ATF" (p. 17).

### Conclusion

The problems associated with the fabricated drug nexus, stale evidence, inflammatory and irrelevant material, and reliance on apostates and allied opponents of Koresh in the ATF investigation and planning of the raid highlight what the congressional report bluntly labels a "grossly incompetent" operation that "lacked the minimum professionalism expected of a major Federal law enforcement agency" (p. 4). Yet these baffling miscues can be explained by our model. The reliance on the warfare narrative of Koresh's opponents produced an exaggerated but convergent image that led to an overreaction by ATF. It did not seem critical to ATF investigators that the information supplied by former members was stale or irrelevant, nor did they raise questions about the objectivity or reliability of their sources. The investigators were inclined to believe the claims were true because they had resonant meaning. To disinterested observers, the ATF investigation leading to the raid plan had an irrational configuration. It was irrational because it was predicated on an inflated narrative image that resulted in egregious errors, misstatements of law, and unprofessional conduct. Yet this is precisely what the model predicts: "When such narratives are freighted with cultural meanings, they may exercise influence on a course of events in ways that exceed or do not depend upon merely factual, legal, or professional considerations" (Hall, 1995: 210).

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