

Waco in red and blue

In April 1993, the FBI siege on the Branch Davidian compound ended in disaster. The event still casts a long shadow on our divided nation.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue



The Mount Carmel Center on fire in Axtell, Texas, April 19, 1993.

In April 1993, the FBI assault on a compound near Waco, Texas, led to a conflagration in which 80 members of the Branch Davidian sect perished, including 20 children. The horrific incident forced religious believers to explore the consequences of apocalyptic thought and fundamentalist faith, but it also

contributed to popular debate over many other issues. Waco came to signify bitter divisions over matters as diverse as violence and gun ownership, trust in government and popular sovereignty, religious persecution, and issues of gender and masculinity. The disaster generated a flood of books, articles, news stories and television segments. It became an unavoidable part of public discourse. Waco became a vital topic in the nation's newly declared culture wars, and we still live with its consequences.

The exact outline of the Waco affair is so disputed and controversial that it sometimes seems as if rival factions are describing utterly different events. What can be agreed on is that the Branch Davidians were a small apocalyptic-minded sect related to the Seventh-day Adventists and that they had been based near Waco for some 60 years at a settlement the sect called Mount Carmel.

From the late 1980s, the group was under the sway of a charismatic leader who took the messianic name David Koresh. Expecting an imminent end-time event, Koresh's followers took their military preparations very seriously, buying a sizable stock of weapons. This attracted the attention of federal law enforcement agencies, who feared that the group was converting (legal) semiautomatic rifles into fully automatic machine guns, which was prohibited by law.

On February 28, a well-armed force from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms tried to execute a search warrant at Mount Carmel. The raid was a fiasco. Federal agents were worsted in the ensuing gun battle. Four ATF officers were killed, and the rest were forced into a humiliating withdrawal. The FBI took over control of the situation from the ATF. A 51-day siege culminated in another federal assault on April 19, when an uncontrollable blaze swamped the compound. Depending on which account you believe, the fire was started by FBI intervention, either deliberately or recklessly, or by Koresh himself, who ordered the burning of the compound as an act of mass suicide.

The investigation of the event dragged on for years. Officially, at least, federal agencies stand acquitted of the gravest charges. But popular responses to the disaster demonstrated an enormous cultural chasm. Although the red and blue state color code would not be established until 2000, the cultural clash drawn along political lines was already very much in evidence in 1993.

Responses to Waco were driven largely by attitudes to religion. For many people, the extreme apocalyptic views of the Branch Davidians posed an obvious threat. Their religious ideology placed the group outside the realm of rational discourse and made it inherently likely that they would carry out acts of crime or terrorism. Religious extremism was firmly in the headlines at this time, because the first jihadist attack on the World Trade Center had occurred just two days before the initial Mount Carmel fire. Waco therefore seemed an egregious example of the dangers posed by fundamentalism, whether Christian or otherwise.

From this perspective, Waco demonstrated everything that was wrong with “extreme” religion: its fanaticism and sexual hypocrisy, leading inevitably to violence and sexual exploitation. This discourse had special power in the early 1990s in reaction to the prominence of the Moral Majority and the Christian right during the Reagan era. Those triumphs had come to a crashing halt with the televangelist scandals of 1987, making evangelicals and fundamentalists fair game for media attacks in a way that they would not have been a few years earlier. It was easy to place Koresh alongside the self-evident evils of Islamic terrorism. Fanatics were fanatics and deserved no part in mainstream U.S. political life.

Early media coverage closely followed this interpretation of extreme fundamentalist faith, to the point of demonstrating a profoundly apocalyptic strand in the liberal critique of religion. *Time* magazine offered a double image of Koresh alongside the blind Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, the mastermind of the World Trade Center attack. Both men showed what went wrong “when believers embrace the dark side of faith.” *Time* continued: “From downtown Manhattan to the plains of Texas to the mountains of Bosnia, religious hatred can become a blunt instrument that ultimately destroys believer and nonbeliever alike.” These themes were reinforced two weeks later when an antiabortion militant murdered a doctor in Pensacola, Florida.

Still more potent visuals followed after the April fire. *Time*’s extraordinary cover showed a laughing David Koresh superimposed on the burning compound, with the biblical caption “His name was Death, and Hell followed with him.” *People Weekly*, another mass circulation outlet, depicted Koresh as the evil messiah, a pedophile who led his fanatical disciples to tragedy. Cartoons showed Koresh in the company of Sheikh Omar and (inevitably) with a ghostly Jim Jones, who offers David a cup of Kool-Aid. In its various forms, it seemed, religious fanaticism was rampant.

Yet that was not the whole story. A rival interpretation blamed the violence on the brutal excesses of an out-of-control federal government engaged in a systematic assault on the lives and liberties of free citizens, specifically Christians. From this standpoint, the Branch Davidians were not a cult but a persecuted church, and Waco was the scene of a massacre rather than a suicide. In 1993 more than a quarter of Americans disapproved of the FBI's actions at Mount Carmel, and that number grew steadily in following years. By the end of the decade, 62 percent of respondents accepted the view that federal forces themselves had started the deadly fires.

This critique was rooted in religious concerns. A large proportion of the population took (and takes) apocalyptic interpretations of the Bible seriously. For anyone who read the book of Revelation as divinely inspired, it was disturbing to hear FBI negotiators dismissing Koresh's efforts to wrestle with that thorny text as deranged "Bible babble."

The issue of guns was also deeply divisive. From the liberal standpoint, if a group in a remote settlement owns a large stockpile of weapons, it must be plotting something catastrophic. Red-state America is more likely to see that group as gun collectors or dealers and to describe their weapons not as an arsenal but an inventory. Without clear evidence of criminal intent, argued these critics, federal agents had no justification for trying to seize privately held weapons. Indeed, the initial Waco raid looked just like the kind of mass gun confiscation that the National Rifle Association had long argued was the logical outcome of gun control legislation.

In order to understand the power of this "God and guns" interpretation, it helps to recall the political culture of the time, just a few weeks after Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration. Clinton owed his victory largely to economic discontent and the sharp recession that had undermined the presidency of George H. W. Bush. Yet for all the economic concerns, cultural and religious matters were very much at the forefront of the 1992 campaign. Bush had faced a severe challenge from Patrick Buchanan, whose speech at the Republican national convention galvanized social conservatives. Buchanan warned, "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the cold war itself."

The phrase "culture war" epitomized widespread concerns about morality issues such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography and the apparent exclusion of religion from public life. For Buchanan, the Clintons supported far-reaching changes in

American life, but “not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God’s country.”

Quite apart from party politics, the United States was in these years undergoing a shift in gender attitudes that in many ways was quite as radical as the late 1960s and which represented a culmination of that earlier era. Between 1989 and 1994, the nation was in the throes of full-scale gender wars, in the sense of a systematic cultural assault on the evils resulting from traditional male authority and its associated violence against women and children. Gender politics—feminist and gay—achieved a new mainstream status. Patriarchal institutions—courts, legislatures, churches, armed forces—were assailed as never before, and those battles echoed through popular culture.

The year 1991 alone marked the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in the U.S. Senate, with the attendant focus on sexual harassment; the Tailhook harassment scandal; and the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith. Between 1992 and 1994, charges of sexual abuse against Roman Catholic clergy became so commonplace as to spur talk of a national abuse epidemic. It was in the early 1990s that the terrifying concepts of “stalking” and “sexual predators” both entered the social and legal mainstream.

Legitimately or not, feminist activism was represented by two prominent figures in 1992–1993—Hillary Clinton and Janet Reno, Clinton’s attorney general. Bill Clinton’s electoral success depended on his huge advantage among women voters. In the climate of the time, liberals found convincing the Justice Department’s stance that the Waco raids had been forced by allegations of child abuse and sexual exploitation at Mount Carmel. (To be quite clear on this sensitive issue, there is no serious doubt that David Koresh had been engaged in the systematic abuse of younger girls and should have faced serious criminal charges for those actions. However, that abuse did not provoke the initial raid, which was wholly motivated by government fears of terrorism and gun trafficking. Only retroactively did the administration stress the abuse issue.)

But if powerful constituencies supported the administration, it also faced grave challenges. The Democratic victory in 1992 masked serious underlying weaknesses, inviting a conservative reaction focused on such traditionally male issues as gun ownership. Although Clinton won in 1992, his share of the popular vote was only a little better than Walter Mondale’s in 1984, and it actually fell short of what Michael

Dukakis had achieved in 1988. Without Ross Perot siphoning off 19 percent of voters nationwide, Clinton could never have beaten the incumbent President Bush.

Conservatives regrouped over the next two years, targeting the administration's liberal and feminist politics. Core issues included the alleged maternalism of the administration's health care plans, its attempt to remove restrictions from gay service in the military and its support for a greater military role for women. Janet Reno's role in the Justice Department reinforced the gender dimension of the perceived threat to civil liberties, religious freedom and the traditional social order. In 1994, Democrats lost the House for the first time in 40 years and lost further ground in the Senate. Conservatives now positioned themselves for still greater advances, planning for Buchanan's 1996 presidential bid.

Right-wing groups made the "Waco Massacre" a watchword for oppressive federal power, a simultaneous assault on traditional religion and constitutional rights. The incident served a potent symbolic role among the grassroots organizations that now became so crucial to Republican success. From 1993, that conservative base included the extremely important world of talk radio, widely credited for contributing to the victories of hardline congressional conservatives. Waco also galvanized an increasingly aggressive NRA. In 1995, the NRA's Wayne LaPierre spoke of federal agents as "jackbooted government thugs."

Right-wing and populist anger over Waco surged in mid-decade. Several widely circulated videotapes purported to reveal the truth of the affair, including the sinister role of government. Notable examples included Linda Thompson's *Waco: The Big Lie* and the potent 1997 documentary *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*. The events at Waco merged with other florid conspiracy theories, such as those about the Clintons' Whitewater real estate dealings and the death of White House aide Vincent Foster.

The conservative reaction also manifested in a radical right "patriot" movement that flirted with armed extremism and antigovernment militancy. By some estimates, by 1995 militias were attracting the support of perhaps a quarter million Americans, and groups existed in all 50 states. Also at its height in these years was an aggressive antiabortion movement pledged to engage in direct action, including the overtly terrorist Army of God.

The ideological foundations of the new radical right varied enormously, from hard-core racists and neo-Nazis to more moderate conservatives who feared an assault on gun rights. In fact, the single theme unifying the various strands was that of self-defense—the idea that traditional American liberties and values were under imminent threat from an oppressive globalist-corporatist threat, an evil and probably satanic New World Order. Antigovernment sentiment merged seamlessly with explicitly religious apocalyptic fears of a kind very familiar throughout American history.

In such a vision, two incidents demonstrated the need to defend the right of free individuals to live freely apart from a corrupted society, to flee from the wrath so evidently about to come. One was the 1992 shooting at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in which federal agents killed the wife of survivalist Randy Weaver. The other was Waco, which neatly incorporated themes of religious liberty as well as gun rights. The difference between the two, of course, was that the Ruby Ridge incident was known chiefly within the circle of convinced believers, while the name of Waco was instantly familiar worldwide. It offered vastly more potential for recruitment—and for explaining a case to the media. Without Waco, the patriot movement would never have gained the traction that it did.

Patriot and militia groups remained in dialogue with more mainstream politics and won the sympathy of some political leaders. Responding to its conservative base, the Congress that assumed its duties in 1995 supported the long-demanded investigation of the Waco affair. Both House and Senate held lengthy hearings that year.

Given the surging antigovernment sentiment of 1994–95, we might be surprised that the conservative campaign over Waco achieved so little success. The reason for that is the Oklahoma City bombing of April 1995, which killed 168. As the bombing took place on the second anniversary of the Waco firestorm, it was widely taken as revenge for that event. Moreover, the Oklahoma City culprits had strong ties to militias.

The Oklahoma City bombing transformed the American political landscape, inflicting massive damage on the conservative cause and forcing moderates to abandon the patriot movement. The crisis also gave Bill Clinton new status as a symbol of national unity and moderation. This event set the stage for the Democratic victory the following year, a triumph that would have seemed inconceivable a very short

time before.

But Waco and its aftereffects continued to poison the political atmosphere, contributing mightily to the polarization of U.S. politics that we often lament today. Throughout the 1990s, conservatives sustained their attack on the Clinton administration, claiming not merely that it was corrupt or incompetent but that it was overtly criminal and tyrannical. Liberals in turn used the memory of Oklahoma City and the militias to tar conservatives with violent and racist tendencies. Up through September 11, 2001, cinema and mass media overwhelmingly reflected the liberal view that this element on the right was the clear and present danger facing America. And when George W. Bush took office in 2001, liberals paid back with interest the vicious rhetoric and conspiracy-mongering that conservatives had earlier directed against the Clintons.

In some ways, tensions have lessened. Today we face nothing like the far-right terror threat of the mid-1990s. But stark divisions still mark contemporary politics, and they surface all the more vividly over such hot-button issues as gun control.

The fires of Waco mattered so much because they burned at a critical turning point in American politics and cultural debate. However terrible the Waco disaster was in its own right, it was also a potent symbol of and contributor to a bitter and seemingly irreconcilable polarization. Waco still casts a very long shadow.

This essay is adapted from a speech Jenkins gave this month at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion in Waco, Texas.