Waco, Federal Law Enforcement, and Scholars of Religion

by Nancy T. Ammerman

After the disastrous BATF raid on the home of the Branch Davidians, as the FBI settled into their long siege and the world's news organizations created a small village outside the perimeter, scholars of religion--with near unanimity--shook their collective heads in disbelief at the strategies being adopted by federal law enforcement. Did they not know that a group was more likely to rally behind its charismatic leader than to surrender to his enemies? Did they not know that apocalyptic beliefs should be taken seriously, that they were playing the role of the enemies of Christ? Did they not know that any course of action that did not seem to come from the Bible would be unacceptable to these students of Scripture? Did they really believe they were dealing with hostages? I have yet to encounter a single sociologist or religious studies scholar who has the slightest doubt that the strategies adopted by the FBI were destined for tragic failure. [1]

So the question arises, how could the FBI proceed with a strategy of increasing psychological and tactical pressure, if there was such a large body of expert opinion that would have advised against such a strategy? That is the primary question with which I undertook advising the Justice and Treasury Departments on future dealings with "persons whose motivations and thought processes are unconventional" (the language of our charge from Deputy Attorney General Philip Heymann and Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Ron Noble). During the summer of 1993, after the tragic end of the siege in Waco, officials in both Justice and Treasury had concluded that mistakes had been made, that the situation was not one that could be dealt with like a normal "hostage/barricade" situation, and that such "unconventional thinking" was likely to present itself to federal law enforcement again. They decided they needed advice.

But they still did not know who to call. Through their usual "old boy" networks (which evidently needed to include at least one girl), a group was assembled and designated the "behavioral science experts." We were to be "non-compensated temporary government employees" until such time as we had each delivered a report to the deputy attorney general. Each of us had some experience in studying religious persons and groups that might be called by many in "main-stream" America unconventional, but

none of us came from the well-recognized group of scholars who specialize in new religious movements. Professor Lawrence Sullivan, of Harvard Divinity School, had studied millennial movements in Brazil. Professor Alan Stone of Harvard Law School and Professor Robert Cancro of NYU Medical School had both studied and written on the intersection of law, psychiatry, and religion. And I had conducted research on fundamentalists, including those in the Southern Baptist Convention. I decided that one of my basic goals would be to introduce federal law enforcement officials to relevant scholars and scholarly literature.

The data-gathering for this project began with oral briefings conducted at the Justice Department by the investigative teams Justice and Treasury had put in place to find out what happened in Waco, and continued with group interviews with the people in charge of negotiations and tactical strategy in Waco. A second round of briefings, at the Treasury Department and at the FBI Training Academy at Quantico, introduced the behavioral science experts to the people behind the scenes for BATF and the FBI, respectively. In addition, I had access to a number of other sources. I was supplied with a list of the experts consulted by the FBI during the affair. I also spoke with Glenn Hilburn, professor of religion at Baylot [who was one of those experts), and I made a second trip to Quantico to talk with agents Pete Sinerick and Gregg McCrary at the FBI Academy.

During our first round of briefings, especially in our conversations with the hostage negotiators who had been involved in Waco, the most striking finding was the FBI's near total dismissal of the religious beliefs of the Branch Davidians. For these men, David Koresh was a sociopath, and his followers were hostages. Religion was a convenient cover for Koresh's desire to control his followers and monopolize all the rewards for himself. They saw no reason to try to understand his religious beliefs, indeed thought them so bizarre as to be incomprehensible by normal people.[2] The negotiators expressed deep regret at this state of affairs, but could see no alternatives to the way they had come to understand the situation. The tactical commanders had no real regret, seeing the final outcome as unavoidable.

Why Religion Was Ignored

In those conversations, and in subsequent ones, four reasons for this dismissal of religion can be seen. First, for at least some of those involved, religion is itself a foreign category. They have little experience with religion themselves, and they do not really understand how anyone could believe in a reality not readily provable by empirical means. They are what Max Weber would call “religiously unmusical" (in Weber 1946, 25). The level of religious unmusicality in this case is evident in the investigative and evaluative reports compiled by the Justice Department's own staff. A small, but telling example: throughout those reports, the last book in the Bible is incorrectly identified as “Revelations" (rather than the book of Revelation). People in positions of public service have perhaps come to believe that religion is not a part of the culture about which they have any need to be conversant, whether or not they themselves are believers. Sullivan's report to the Justice and Treasury Departments concentrates very effectively

on this aspect of the problem. At least for a significant segment of those involved in Waco, the “culture of disbelief" (Carter 1993) was a tragic fact.

Within the law enforcement community, this skepticism about religion has a particular flavor. Given a history of encounters with manipulative conversions of convenience, many officers are inclined to dismiss the validity of religion as an independent variable. When criminal "gets religion” that person is still - to their minds - fundamentally a criminal. This reason for dismissing religion's impact is closely related to a second factor at work in the federal officials whom I observed.[3] At least some of those officials had significant religious upbringing, but now reject that past as benighted. They were not ignorant of religion or of its power to shape a way of life. They simply did not think that any rational person would choose to be religious. At best, they had a "live and let live" attitude about religion. Their history did not make them tone-deaf so much as it made them unsympathetic.

Still a third group of agents was thoroughly attuned to the power of religion. As people of deep faith themselves, they knew that beliefs mattered· However, the depth of their own faith sometimes made it difficult for them to identify with someone whose faith was so different. Because Koresh practiced many things their faith forbade, they could only see his group as heretical or perhaps as a “cult." They could not see the functional similarities between their own experience and the experiences of the Branch Davidians.

Fourth, overlapping all the other causes for law enforcement’s failure to understand the religious dynamics of the Branch Davidian standoff, everyone involved fell victim to the images inherent in the label "cult.” ·Others have addressed this problem in more detail elsewhe re (see Lewis, this volume). Here it will suffice to note that when religious categories were invoked at all, they were categories derived from the definitions of cult leadership and behavior promulgated by the news media over the last two decades. A "cult leader," according to these images, can be easily seen as a sociopath, and "brainwashed,, members can be defined as hostages. By defining a "destructive cult" as a group with an egomaniacal leader and ego-deficient followers, one need not attend closely to the particular religious beliefs and practices of the group. All that matters is the psychological control being exercised by the leader over unwitting followers.

For the four reasons I have suggested, those directing the federal law enforcement effort in Waco were unable or unwilling to see that they should take seriously the religious nature of the social system they had entered. But they were also blinded by the structures of own agencies and their own standard operating procedures.

Why Good Advice Was Ignored

In the months that led up to the February 28 attempted "dynamic entry" at the Branch Davidians' home, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms {BATF) apparently failed to solicit any social science background information about the nature of the group with which they were dealing.[4] BATF has no internal behavioral science division and did not consult with any other behavioral science persons within the government. Nor

did they consult with outside persons in religious studies, sociology of religion, or psychology of religion. There were, for instance, persons in the Baylor University Department of Religion who had studied this particular group for much of its history; they were not consulted. The agency viewed this operation exclusively through strategic and political lenses, with no attempt to ascertain why this group had guns, what they might want to do with them, and how the larger citizenry might be assured that no harm would result from the weapons that had been purchased. In that atmosphere, I believe, it became easy to lose sight of the human dynamics of the group involved, to plan as if the group were indeed a military target. It also discouraged the BATF from seeking other forms of intervention in the group. Quite simply, the agency pursued the line of action--armed assault--for which they were best equipped (and that not very well, as it turned out). If they had been better equipped to pursue interventions based on human science advice, they might have acted differently.

In their attempt to build a case against the Branch Davidians, the BATF concentrated on informants who could presumably provide the strategic information they needed to plan their assault. They interviewed persons who were former members of the group and at least one person, Rick Ross, who had "deprogrammed" a group member. Ross has been quoted as saying that he was consulted by the BATE and their records include accounts of multiple interviews with him. He supplied them, according to BATF records, with "all information he had regarding the Branch Davidian cult," including the name of a former member whom he believed would have important strategic information. At the same time, he and Cult Awareness Network affiliates seem to have been among the sources for the series of stories run by the Waco newspaper, beginning February 27. At the very least, Ross and any former members he was associated with should have been seen as questionable sources of information, but no such caution seems to have been present in BATF dealings with him. Having no access to information from the larger social science community, BATF had no way to put in perspective what they heard from angry former members and an eager deprogrammer.

Unlike the BATE the Federal Bureau of Investigation did have an extensive system of internal and external expertise on which to call. After the failed raid, handling of the crisis passed to the FBI. Although they had a much broader array of information available, they still failed to consult a single person who might be recognized by the social science community as an expert on the Branch Davidians or on other new, marginal, or apocalyptic religious movements. The official list of outside experts consulted, compiled by the investigative team, includes three persons in the field of psychiatry who have been regular consultants to the FBI on other cases (Murray Myron, Syracuse University, a member of the Cult Awareness Network; Joseph Krofcheck, Yarrow Associates; and Park Dietz, University of California-Los Angeles). From my conversations with the persons in the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) who worked with the negotiators at Waco, I believe that these three persons were the most frequently consulted experts throughout the siege. Dietz assisted in writing the profile of Koresh. Others apparently assisted in recommending strategies to the negotiators and tacticians.

It is unclear which of these consultants (if any) recommended the psychological warfare tactics (Tibetan chants, sounds of rabbits dying, rock music, floodlights, helicopters hovering, etc.). None of the persons associated with NCAVC with whom I have talked claims to have favored these tactics, but no one was willing to say who recommended them or how the decision was made to use them.

Three other persons were apparently called in for specific, limited consultations. Because he was examining the children who were leaving the ranch, Bruce Perry, a Baylor Medical School psychiatrist, was consulted. A pastor in Virginia (Douglas Kittredge) was consulted on one occasion, offering assistance in interpreting the scriptural references being used by Koresh. And CBN talk show host Craig Smith was consulted regarding the airing of the Koresh tape. With the possible exception of Perry, these persons clearly had no effect on the strategy in Waco. Kittredge was evidently the pastor of the church attended by one of the agents, and Craig Smith happened into the drama when Koresh wanted his teachings to receive a wide and sympathetic hearing.

On the official list of outside experts consulted, one person in religious studies is listed - Glenn Hilburn, chair of the Religion department at Baylor. He was contacted about one week after the initial raid and was asked especially for help in interpreting Koresh's ideas about the seven seals. He offered the negotiators basic tools for interpreting scripture (a set of commentaries and concordances) and consulted with them on a number of occasions about various biblical interpretations. While Hilburn is a reputable scholar in church history, he would never claim to be an expert on the Davidians or on other marginal religious movements. He often offered to help the FBI get in touch with others who might offer such expertise, but he was not asked to do so. For instance, Professor Bill Pitts, also of the Baylor faculty, had studied the history of the Davidians, but was not consulted by the FBI. Nor did they seek Hilburn's help in locating others, outside the Baylor faculty, who might help.

In my judgment, the FBI's list of outside consultants is sorely wanting. The psychiatrists who were most intimately involved are undoubtedly experienced in helping the FBI understand "the criminal mind." This however, was a very different situation, and we have no evidence that any of these men had background or experience in dealing with a high-commitment religious group. Both of the psychiatrists who later offered reports to Justice and Treasury - Cancro and Stone - were highly critical of the assessments and strategies that resulted from failing to take the religious and social situation into account. The only experts in religion who were consulted lacked the kinds of expertise necessary for understanding the dynamics of an ostracized religious movement. They tended to be religious leaders who had developed their own views on the meaning of the Bible, but had little comparative perspective with which to offer insight.

In addition to the experts sought out by the FBI, many others were eager to offer their help, and one of the problems faced by the Waco negotiators was that of assessing the potential helpfulness of such outside experts. Agents on the scene in Waco described their situation as "information overload." One person referred to the threat of "fax meltdown." Not only were they receiving constant information about the situation as it

unfolded, they were also being bombarded with offers of help from all sorts of unknown sources. Many of these and were judged to be crackpots. Others were probably legitimate and potentially helpful persons. However, the persons on the scene had no way to evaluate this information. With no one in the scholarly community at their disposal to help evaluate the credentials and experience of these persons, their impulse was to discount everything they received. Over the course of the siege, agents on the scene received communication from several persons who claimed biblical expertise and urged the negotiators to take Koresh's beliefs seriously. In all cases, it appears, the information was taken down, passed along, and ignored. For instance, the logs from March 17 make clear that agents on the scene did not take seriously the possibility that Philip Arnold's broadcast discussion of biblical prophecy might be useful to their negotiations.[5] They evidently recognized that Arnold is a reputable scholar, but had apparently not talked with him or listened to the broadcast themselves.

Some of the theologians who got through to Waco were of doubtful credentials, but they were uniform in their suggestions that successful negotiations would require meeting Koresh on his own biblical ground. Talking about the Bible, however, was proving frustrating to the negotiators. In the log of March 15, negotiators reported that they would start being "more firm with the group - no more Bible babble."

Although the negotiators were apparently discounting the efforts of theologians, biblical scholars, and others, they were still listening to Rick Ross. The FBI's interview transcripts document that Ross was, in fact, closely involved with the BATF and the FBI. He talked with the FBI both in early March and in late March. He apparently had the most extensive access to both agencies of any person on the "cult expert" list and was listened to more attentively. The BATF interviewed the persons he directed them to and evidently used information from those interviews in planning their February 28 raid. In late March, Ross recommended that agents attempt to humiliate Koresh, hoping to drive a wedge between him and his followers. While Ross's suggestions may not have been followed to the letter, FBI agents apparently believed that their attempts to embarrass Koresh (talking about his inconsistencies, lack of education, failures as a prophet, and the like) would produce the kind of internal dissension Ross predicted. Because Ross had been successful in using such tactics on isolated and beleaguered members during & programming, he must have assumed that they would work en masse. Any student of group psychology could have dispelled that misapprehension. But the FBI was evidently listening more closely to these deprogramming- related strategies than to the counsel of scholars who might have explained the dynamics of a group under siege.

The FBI interview report includes the note that Ross "has a personal hatred for all religious cults" and would willingly aid law enforcement in an attempt to "destroy a cult." Significantly, the FBI report does not include any mention of the numerous legal challenges to the tactics employed by Ross in extricating members from the groups he hates.[6] Both the seriousness with which agents treated Ross and the lack of seriousness with which they treated various religion scholars and theologians demonstrate again the inability of agents on the scene to make informed judgments

about the information to which they had access and their inability to seek out better information. It also demonstrates the preference given to anticult psychological tactics over strategies that would meet the group on grounds that took faith seriously.
While all this advice was coming in from the outside, the FBI was also relying on its own internal Behavioral Science Unit. The Behavioral Science Services Unit, especially its Investigative Support Unit, at the NCAVC, houses a number of people with considerable working knowledge of marginal religious groups. For instance, Gregg McCrary, in the Criminal Investigative Analysis sub-unit, is well informed in this area and was on the scene in Waco throughout much of the siege. While no one there would be considered an expert by the usual standards of scholarship (academic credentials and publication, that is); several have done sufficient reading to have a good basic knowledge of the nature of religious groups. They know that religious beliefs have to be taken seriously, and they know that it takes more than understanding an individual personality to understand the dynamics of a group. They could benefit from additional training and from access to reliable outside experts, but they had the basic social science knowledge they needed to analyze this situation.

In the early days of the siege, Pete Sinerick, along with outside consultant Park Dietz, put together a profile of David Koresh and of the group. They used materials gathered by the BATF but knew they should weigh carefully the reports from former members. Based on that assessment, Smerick (with Special Agent Mark Young) wrote on March 5, in a memo to his superiors (the Special Agents in Charge, or SACs, at Waco and people in headquarters in Washington),

> For years he [Koresh] has been brainwashing his followers for this battle [between his church and his enemies], and on February 28, 1993, his prophesy came true. As of March 5, 1993, Koresh is still able to convince his followers that the end is near and, as he predicted, their enemies will surround them and kill them. In traditional hostage situations, a strategy which has been successful has been negotiations coupled with ever increasing tactical presence. In this situation, however, it is believed this strategy, if carried to excess, could eventually be counterproductive and could result in loss of life. Every time his followers sense movement of tactical personnel, Koresh validates his prophetic warnings that an attack is forthcoming and they are going to have to defend themselves. According to his teachings, if they die defending their faith, they will be saved.

On March 7, Sinerick and Young listed the psychological warfare tactics available to the FBI, but cautioned that these options "would also succeed in shutting down negotiations and convince Koresh and his followers that the end is near."

On March 8, the same pair cautioned that the Mr. Carmel compound was for the Davidians sacred ground, something they were likely to defend against the intrusions of people they considered evil (the federal government). Summarizing the arguments of people using primarily criminal or psychological categories to explain Koresh, they wrote,

> It has been speculated that Koresh's religious beliefs are nothing more than a con, in order to get power, money, women, etc., and that a strong show of force (tanks, APC's, weapons, etc.) will crumble that resolve, causing him to surrender. In fact, the opposite very well may also occur, whereby the presence of that show of force will draw David Koresh and his followers closer together in the “bunker mentality,” and they would rather die than surrender.

They go on to detail the way in which FBI actions were playing into the prophetic scheme of Koresh, warning that "we may unintentionally make his prophesy [death, or the "fourth seal"] come true, if we take what he perceives to be hostile or aggressive action." They note that "mass suicide ordered by Koresh cannot be discounted." Then, following their logic through to its conclusion, they point out that "one way to take control away from him is to do the opposite of what he is expecting. Instead of moving towards him, we consider moving back. This may appear to be appeasement to his wishes, but in reality, it is taking power away from him. He has told his followers that an attack is imminent, and this will show them that he was wrong."

It is my belief that this understanding of Koresh's ideas was basically accurate and that their assessment of his likely behavior was on target. While outside experts might have refined this picture and added nuance to the assessment, the basic direction of the FBI's own behavioral analysts was sound.

Clearly the advice of these agents was not heeded. Why? The answer to that question takes us first to the structure of command and second to the culture and training of the FBI itself. Most basically, people representing the Behavioral Sciences Unit were outranked and outnumbered. Within the command structure, people from the Hostage Rescue Team carried more weight than people who were negotiators. In addition, it is evident that people from the tactical side were simply trusted more and were more at home with the SACs in Waco.

As I understand it, the SACs for this operation were chosen on the basis of proximity, not on the basis of any special training or experience for an operation like this. Understandably, their primary skills are in the apprehension of criminals and in the management of personnel. Under normal circumstances, they can count on key assistance in apprehension of criminals from their SWAT teams and from Hostage Rescue Teams (HRTs), and predictably they listened most closely to people who spoke the language of forceful tactics. This was the territory in which they were most comfortable, possibly the direction in which they perceived the most potential rewards. There was an understandable desire among many agents in Waco to make Koresh and the Davidians pay for the harm they had caused. Arguments for patience or unconventional tactics fell on deaf ears.[7]

Those ears were deaf for a number of reasons, many of which have to do with the

training and culture of the FBI. In all likelihood, these SACs had had no behavioral science training since their very early training as agents. nd then, they were very unlikely to have heard anything about religious belief systems or group dynamics. Their entire professional world has been constructed (understandably) around comprehending and outmaneuvering criminals. They think (again, understandably) in terms of individual behavior (hence the near exclusive focus on Koresh, rather than on the group) and on criminal wrongdoing (hence the label "sociopath" for someone seen as dangerously at odds with society's norms). Little, if anything, in their previous experience prepared them for the kind of situation Mt. Carmel presented them.

The tendency to discount the influence of religious beliefs and to evaluate situations largely in terms of a leader's individual criminal or psychological motives is, I believe, very widespread in the FBI. In our initial briefings with negotiators and tacticians, the consensus around the table was that when they encountered people with religious beliefs, those beliefs were usually a convenient cover for criminal activity. While they were willing to consider that this case might have been different, they were still not convinced that Koresh was anything other than a sociopath who had duped some people into helping him carry out aggressive criminal activity. They continued to refer to the members of the group as hostages, failing to recognize the free choice those people had made in following Koresh.

Behavioral science advice, then, failed to get an adequate hearing. In the culture of the law enforcement community, neither training nor experience prepares agents for taking behavioral scientists seriously. And in the crisis situation, behavioral scientists are out-ranked and out-numbered. As a result, those in charge approached this situation as if it were one more familiar to them - a criminal committing illegal acts for personal gain for whom the threat of force is a significant deterrent.

What Can Be Done?

To alter that basic pattern of action and response, a number of changes in law enforcement practice are essential. In my report to the Justice and Treasury Departments, I recommended the following.

1. *Basic training.* The training for all agents should include units in the behavioral sciences and units that give attention to the nature of political and religious groups. These units should emphasize both the rights of such groups to exist unhindered and the characteristics of high-commitment groups that may be relevant to future efforts at law enforcement. Such units should be aimed not so much at making every agent an expert as at sensitizing agents to the complex human dimensions of the situations in which they may find themselves. When they hear behavioral scientists advising them later, it will not be the first time they have heard such voices in the law enforcement community.

2. *Advanced training.* Incidents like Waco are, fortunately, relatively rare. Not everyone in federal law enforcement needs to be an expert on such situations. However, it appears that there is a need for a standing group of specialists in managing

this sort of crisis. Rather than turning to whomever happens to be the local SAC, the FBI (and similar federal agencies) should have a small corps of crisis managers available. These persons should have received advanced training both in the various tactical measures at their disposal and in the insights available to them from the behavioral sciences.

3. *Training and expertise for other federal agencies.* An expanded Behavioral Sciences Unit, perhaps not lodged in a single agency, might make a broader pool of behavioral science information available on a regular basis to all federal law enforcement agencies. I was particularly struck by the fact that BATF has no such unit. No one ever had the responsibility of imagining what the people at Mt. Carmel were like, or how they might be thinking. With dozens of federal law enforcement agencies, it would not be cost-effective to set up behavioral science units in each one, but such expertise should be available to all of them.

4. *A broader pool of experts who can be consulted.* Not all sorts of expertise are needed all the time. But agencies should not be caught in a moment of crisis wondering who to call and how to assess the credentials of those who call them. It is essential that behavioral scientists inside federal law enforcement and behavioral scientists in the academic community forge expanded working ties. People in law enforcement have for too long distrusted the "ivory tower" position of academics who do not have to make "real world" decisions. They have too long insisted that only someone who is really an insider to law enforcement can give them advice. For their part, academics have for too long discounted the experience and wisdom of persons working in law enforcement because it did not come in standard academic packages. It is my sense that this incident provides an opportune moment for overcoming both those problems. Law enforcement people are more aware than ever of the need for additional insight and training, and academics are more aware of their obligation to the public.

That new cooperation might take a number of forms. The various training facilities for federal law enforcement might host a series of consultations in which a small group of academics and a small group of agents work together for two or three days on problems and potential problems facing law enforcement. Academics, for their part, might organize sessions at annual professional meetings at which such questions are raised and to which law enforcement people are invited. In addition, people teaching in the various academies should be encouraged to read more widely and to draw in outside experts for both routine and specialized training whenever possible. Such ongoing collaboration would have the benefit of acquainting the two communities with each other so that each would be better prepared for cooperation in a time of crisis.

Most concretely, it is essential that federal law enforcement develop an expanded list of experts on whom it can call. These people need not be on contract. They simply need to be people the agencies already know to be legitimate, reliable, and willing to cooperate with them. The sorts of activities I am suggesting above would aid in the development of such a list. In addition, the various professional associations - the American Sociological Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association - could also be helpful. It is essential that persons in federal law enforcement use this occasion to think proactively about the kinds of

situations they are likely to encounter in the future and to seek out now the expertise they will need in confronting groups who may have broken the law not for personal gain, but out of ideological and religious conviction.

The siege in Waco provided dramatic and tragic proof both that religion remains a potent motivating force for many in American society and that most of those who serve as the watchdogs and interpreters of American society have little ability to understand the religious forces they encounter. The explanations offered by anticult groups comport well with this culture of disbelief. They offer us "psychological disturbance" and "brainwashing" to account for the life paths of committed believers whose practices put them at odds with materialist, secular pursuits. But those explanations neither made sense of the actions of the Branch Davidians nor provided sound guidance to federal law enforcement. It is time for the rest of the social science community to abandon its silence and to be heard at least as loudly and often as are the voices of the "experts" who have gained their expertise by seeking to destroy the groups they purport to understand.

Notes

1. It is interesting to note that the four behavioral science experts asked to review the Waco affair arrived at similar conclusions. Although we had never worked together before and came from very different backgrounds, we were unanimous in our assessment that FBI strategies had been misguided.

2. I was sufficiently influenced by this widespread assessment of Koresh as incomprehensible that I was surprised when I first began to listen to and read his teachings. They are but a variant on what could be found in many fundamentalist and millennialist churches. The methods of study and exegesis he used would be familiar to many conservative students of the Bible, even if they would disagree with his particular interpretations. The assessment of these beliefs as "incomprehensible" reflects both the biblical ignorance of many public officials and news reporters and the power of the term "cult" to render all other attempts at understanding unnecessary.

3. This assessment of the reasons for law enforcement's dismissal of religious motives is based on conversations with the principals involved in Waco, as well as with people involved in training law enforcement persons at the FBI Academy at Quantico.

4. Much of the remainder of this essay is based closely on the report I wrote for the Justice and Treasury Departments.

5. Indeed the efforts by Arnold and James Tabor represented probably the best hope for a peaceful end to the siege. By working within Koresh's biblical system, they had suggested to him an alternative reading of critical passages in the book of Revelation. By this reading, Koresh should have written or recorded his explanation of the seven seals. The prophesied destruction of the true believers would not *have* taken place, in this reading, for a long time. The Davidians would have been free to leave their settlement and deal with the government to resolve their differences. Koresh evidently took this teaching and began his interpretive writing. In his last letter, written the week before the fiery end, he stated that he intended to come out when it was

complete. The FBI, however, did not take this scenario seriously or believe that Koresh would actually write the document (see Tabor *1994,* this volume").

6. Ross was recently under indictment in the state of Washington for the kidnapping of a young man whose membership in a United Pentecostal Church had become worrisome to the young man's mother. Since the victim was legally an adult, his forcible removal from the church earned Ross the kidnapping charge. Minors can sometimes be legally removed, at the behest of their parents, but even this tactic has become less defensible in the courts (see Bromley and Robbins 1992*).*

7. Editor's note: Pete Smerick, who retired immediately after Waco, later stated publicly that "bureau officials pressured him into changing his advice on how to resolve the situation without bloodshed" *(*Washington Times, May 1, 1995*).* Smerick said that he had advised a cautious, non-confrontational approach to Koresh in four memos written for senior FBI officials between March 3 and 8. But he was "pressured from above" when writing the fifth memo on March 9. "As a result, that memo contained subtle changes in tone and emphasis that amounted to an endorsement of a more aggressive approach against the Branch Davidians."

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