

Impact of Branch Davidian tragedy still felt 20 years later

April 19, 2013

WACO—Twenty years after a 51-day siege at the Mount Carmel compound near Waco ended in the deaths of about 80 members of the Branch Davidian sect, the event continues to shape national debate on subjects ranging from religious liberty and individual rights to policies on terrorism, experts told a conference at Baylor University.

“There is a road that runs from Waco through 9/11,” said Philip Jenkins, author of [*Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*](#).

Tragedy at Mount Carmel “led to the upsurge of the far right” and radical antigovernment movements, he added.



David Koresh Jenkins, distinguished professor of history and co-director of the program on historical studies of religion at Baylor University, addressed a conference, [“Reflecting on an American Tragedy,”](#) held at Baylor’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#) the day before the 20th anniversary of the climax of the Branch Davidian siege and 18th anniversary of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma

City. Baylor's religion department and the [Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion](#) sponsored the event.

Explosions in Boston and nearby West—one a terrorist attack and the other an apparent industrial accident—in the days before the conference provided explicit context and unspoken subtext for conference presentations. Baylor President Ken Starr in opening remarks expressed sorrow for “the tragedy that has befallen our neighbors in West” and for what he called “a 21st century Boston Massacre.”

“Things never happen on their own. They are contextualized,” Jenkins said, noting the tragedy at Mount Carmel and American response to it must be understood in light of other events, including a deadly confrontation between federal authorities and survivalists in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992.

On Feb. 28, 1993—two days after Muslim terrorists detonated a truck bomb below the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City—agents with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms raided the Branch Davidian headquarters nine miles east of Waco. A gun battle followed, resulting in the deaths of four ATF agents and six followers of David Koresh, the self-professed prophet of an offshoot Adventist sect.

Popular media painted Koresh as “an evil messiah” and the Branch Davidians as a doomsday cult initially, Jenkins noted.

In the weeks that followed the ATF raid, FBI negotiators convinced Koresh to release 19 children from the compound, and a few adults followed. After negotiations broke down, the FBI assaulted the compound on April 19, launching tear gas. During the attack, fire engulfed the building, and 76 people inside died.

In time, those deaths produced antigovernment backlash, and the Branch Davidian tragedy became “a key organizing force of far-right movements,” Jenkins observed.

In public perception, Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh and Koresh became the face of terrorism in the early 1990s, he observed. Events at Mount Carmel “reshaped ideas about terrorism and brought it home,” he said.

The resulting focus on homegrown terrorists, in turn, shifted focus away from the rising threat posed by Al-Qaeda, he added.

Conference speakers—ranging from the retired chief of the FBI negotiating team to a pair of Branch Davidians, as well as several academic experts—illustrated the changing narrative surround Mount Carmel.

Initially, reports on Koresh and the Branch Davidians focused on allegations of child molestation and fears of a heavily armed apocalyptic doomsday cult. After the fiery conclusion of the standoff at Mount Carmel, some elements of popular culture portrayed the Branch Davidians as deeply religious people who died for their faith, martyred by oppressive government forces.



Stuart Wright, professor of sociology at Lamar University and author of *Armageddon in Waco*, characterized events at Mount Carmel as “a historical marker that gave the far right an identity and a reason to be.”

From the time of the initial ATF raid through the final FBI assault, commanding federal authorities demonstrated “a preference for military

and tactical solutions that undermined and sabotaged negotiations” that could have resulted in a peaceful resolution of the standoff, he insisted.

“The impact is substantial and far-reaching. It is viewed as a sign of government overreach that galvanized the (antigovernment) patriot movement,” he said. “Timothy McVeigh was there, and he watched the tanks roll in.”

The initial ATF response to the Branch Davidians began as “a gun raid,” and it played into “paranoid gun enthusiasts’ worst nightmare,” Wright asserted.

“Debate about gun control is replete with coded messages about Waco,” he said.

Events at Mount Carmel cannot be understood apart from awareness about the Branch Davidian belief in the literal fulfillment of biblical prophecy and Koresh’s perception of himself as a latter-day prophet, said Philip Arnold, executive director of the [Reunion Institute in Houston](#) and founder of the Religious Crisis Task Force.

Arnold and James Tabor, chair of the religious studies department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, worked with the FBI negotiators during the Branch Davidian siege and gave expert testimony at Congressional hearings that followed.

The siege lasted so long because Koresh believed he had received divine insight about the meaning of the seven seals in the New Testament book of Revelation that provided the key to understanding all the Bible, and that revelation need to be recorded, Arnold asserted.

“David Koresh believed he was writing something that would revolutionize Christianity,” he said, adding Koresh wanted to make sure his revelation was written and disseminated before he surrendered to authorities.

Gary Noesner, retired chief of the FBI negotiating unit, insisted he believed Koresh “played games” with negotiators because he wrestled with ambivalent desire. “I think there was a part of him that wanted to come out and a part of him that wanted to stay,” he said.

Koresh—and the influence he had over his followers—presented negotiators a continuing challenge throughout the siege. The other challenge, Noesner asserted, focused on internal tug-of-war between the FBI’s negotiating team, the on-scene commander and the commander of the tactical unit. Even so, nobody wanted the situation to end as it did.

“We’re not jackbooted thugs trying to deprive people of their religious liberties,” he insisted.

Narratives that have described the events at Mount Carmel—“the destructive cult story, the deluded psychopath story, the evil government conspiracy story”—ultimately fall short and fall apart, said [Gordon Melton](#), distinguished professor of American religious history at Baylor.

“The folks at Mount Carmel were our neighbors, much like our neighbors today. ... Their strangeness quotient is no higher than mine,” he said, noting the Branch Davidians’ fascination with End Times prophecy is different only in degree from the preaching in many churches.

Likewise, federal agents at Mount Carmel may have operated from bad information and made bad decisions, but they were not bad people, he insisted.

“Single stories do not work, given the complexities of events,” he said. “There are no heroes here and no villains—just people caught up in events bigger than they were.”