"That's just the American way": The Branch Davidian Tragedy and Western Religious History

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This essay examines religion's role in the 1993 Branch Davidian tragedy and places the event in the West's religious history. Like diverse other religious groups, the Branch Davidians found freedom in the West for decades. That freedom's collapse in 1993 revealed limits to the region's tolerance.

More than a decade has passed since the Branch Davidian tragedy occurred outside Waco, Texas, in 1993. Four federal law enforcement officials died in the initial raid on the Branch Davidian property that February. More than eighty Branch Davidians died in the raid and its aftermath, most in a fire that ravaged their home in the event's horrific climax on 19 April. The story, however, did not end there. Two years later, Timothy McVeigh linked his bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building to his disgust over what happened outside Waco. Some Branch Davidians remain in jail, while others have rebuilt their lives in Waco and around the country. Some of the children who survived the disaster have gone to college and started families. As of this writing, one works in law enforcement. Waco area residents and government officials assigned to the episode have gone on with their lives.[1] A search for meaning as the episode recedes deeper into the past suggests

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[1] Coverage updating the lives of seven surviving Branch Davidian children appeared in "Children of Waco," *Primetime Thursday*, ABCNEWS, broadcast 17 April 2003. Possibly the best monograph treating the Branch Davidians is James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley, 1995). Other treatments include Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago, 1995) and James R. Lewis, ed., *From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco* (Lanham, MD, 1994). Accounts by participants in the tragedy of 19 April 1993, include David Thibodeau and Leon Whiteson, *A Place Called Waco: A Survivor's Story* (New York, 1999) and Christopher Whitcomb, *Cold Zero: Inside the FBI Hostage Rescue Team* (Boston, 2001). The author's expanded discussion of religious conflicts in the West will appear in *God's Country, Uncle Sam's Land: Faith and Force in the American West* (Urbana, forthcoming).

Western Historical Quarterly 35 (Winter 2004): 453–471.

that although the Branch Davidians for decades found a relatively welcoming home in Texas, incompatible visions about faith and freedom brought them into violent conflict with mainstream America and interpretations of its past.

In the West's vast space, Branch Davidians found freedom, an idea fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation. In *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner argues that freedom's significance rests less in the evolution of a single definition than in the multiple purposes to which the idea has been put and the belief systems those purposes illustrate.[2] The same might be said of religion in the American West. Historians have lamented the neglect heaped upon the West's religious history. Among those who have addressed the topic, however, the emerging consensus characterizes the West as a place of opportunity and diversity where no mainstream dominated. Space and isolation created an opportunity for diverse religious groups to find homes in the West, especially for groups stigmatized and restricted elsewhere. Consequently, the West became a religiously contested landscape. As Carl Guarneri put it, "The Far West qualified all definitions of the religious mainstream and all pretensions to Christian hegemony."[3] Space provided freedom and opportunity, which, in turn, generated some notable conflicts.

Two of the most remarkable conflicts happened in the nineteenth century and sent mixed signals about freedom and opportunity in the West. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints found a home in the West. It also found decades of conflict with mainstream America over plural marriage. Practitioners of American Indian ceremonies such as the Sun Dance found themselves in a similar conflict. Most notably, Lakota Ghost Dance adherents experienced repression that contributed to the horrific events at Wounded Knee Creek on 29 December 1890.[4]

The twentieth-century West fits the no-dominant-mainstream interpretation better, but leaves room for discussion about the existence and nature of a religious mainstream. The proliferation of new and variant religious groups in the region, especially in New Mexico and California, suggest an openness not found elsewhere. These groups have contributed to the West's cultural diversity and have reflected the unchurched region's "secularity."

In the late twentieth century, the West experienced another violent paroxysm related to religion. During the 1993 siege, Branch Davidian leader David Koresh

[2] Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York, 1998), xiii–xxii.

[3] Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez, eds., *Religion and Society in the American West: Historical Essays* (Lanham, MD, 1987), 13; Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (New Haven, 1966), 12–54; Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson, 2000).

[4] Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Mormon Question: Polygamy and Constitutional Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (1896; reprint, Lincoln, 1991); Todd M. Kerstetter, "God's Country, Uncle Sam's Land: Religious Exceptionalism, the Myth of the West, and Federal Force" (PhD diss., University of Nebraska, 1997).

explained that he and his followers acted defensively when they fired on Bureau of Alchohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) agents raiding their property. "That's just the American way," Koresh said of using guns to protect family and property against intruders. Koresh's comment, and remarks made by others involved in the conflict, strongly suggest the West does have a religious mainstream and that society still debates the meaning of freedom, and "the American way."[5]

The Branch Davidians trace their roots to a splintering of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian immigrant with a third-grade education, led the split. Houteff, who converted to Seventh-day Adventism at age thirty-two in 1918, began developing two concepts considered heretical by the church while living in Los Angeles. Houteff believed his divinely appointed mission was to purify the church from within and to gather 144,000 "servants of God" who would be saved at the Second Coming. He also believed that biblical prophets taught that the Kingdom of God would be a literal kingdom on earth centered in Palestine.

When Houteff began teaching these ideas in his Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1929, some listened with interest, but the elders disapproved and prohibited him from further teaching. He then turned to publishing his ideas in a periodical he called *The Shepherd's Rod*, which attracted followers and in turn spread his message. By 1934, Seventh-day Adventist officials lost patience with Houteff and removed him from the church rolls. He gathered his followers (popularly called "Shepherd's Rod" after Victor T. Houteff's work, *The Shepherd's Rod*, published in Los Angeles in 1932) and continued teaching. The group adopted the name "Davidian Seventh-day Adventist" in 1942.

Houteff moved the group to Texas, near Waco, in 1935. There they established a commune they called Mount Carmel and sought self-sufficiency. After Houteff died in 1955, his wife, Florence, took over the group and moved them to a 941-acre tract near Elk, Texas, nine miles east of Waco. The remaining members dubbed it New Mount Carmel. In 1959, Florence Houteff predicted the world would end and the Kingdom of God would begin during Passover of that year. More than nine hundred followers from around the country gathered at Mount Carmel to greet the millennium. When nothing happened, many, including Florence Houteff, became disillusioned and left.

During the 1960s, various factions fought for control of Mount Carmel. Eventually, the property fell to Ben and Lois Roden. Ben Roden took leadership of the group based on his claim of a revelation that he was the "Branch" spoken of in the Book of Zechariah and that he had been ordered to build a theocratic kingdom in preparation for Christ's return. After Ben Roden died in 1978, Lois took the reins, based on her revelation that the Holy Spirit was a feminine figure. While Lois Roden traveled

[5] For Koresh quote see, "Lawyer Releases Howell Tape," *Waco (Texas) Tribune-Herald* (hereafter, *WTH*), 28 May 1993. See also Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West*; Stephen Fox, "Boomer Dharma: The Evolution of Alternative Spiritual Communities in Modern New Mexico," in *Religion in Modern New Mexico*, ed. Ferenc M. Szasz and Richard W. Etulain (Albuquerque, 1997), 145–70; Steven M. Tipton, *Getting Saved from the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change* (Berkeley, 1982).

frequently to spread her message, her son, George, attempted to assume his father's mantle as leader of the Branch Davidians. Unfortunately for George, his mother had settled upon someone else to assume the group's leadership, a recent member who had an impressive knowledge of scripture, deep sincerity, and with whom she, at 67, may have had an affair. That newcomer was Vernon Wayne Howell. Still Branch Davidian leader, Lois Roden took young Howell under her wing and gave him a venue for preaching his message. By 1984, he had become a charismatic speaker who so impressed Roden that she dubbed him "a messenger from God."[6] In 1990, Howell legally changed his name to suit his calling. He became known as David Koresh.

To this point in their story, the Branch Davidians had had mixed experiences with the West. Houteff, as an immigrant who came to the United States and worked his way to California, found what many of his predecessors had experienced, a land of opportunity. When he developed a new and controversial message, however, he ran headlong into a wall marking a theological and social boundary and revealing a mainstream that would not brook innovation. Describing community boundaries, Matthew Arnold wrote, "Freedom is a good horse, but you have to ride it somewhere." Looking for space, Houteff moved east, to Texas, to find the type of haven popularly associated with the West. For the next five decades, and then some, Houteff and his followers lived their version of the West's myth. That live-and-let-live chapter in their story ended in 1993. At that point, the shifting fog, which Robert Hine says can obscure community in America, lifted, making abundantly clear the boundaries separating the Branch Davidian community from mainstream America.[7]

The new chapter in the Branch Davidian story stemmed from two roughly concurrent investigations by the *Waco Tribune-Herald* and the BATF beginning in 1992 and continuing into 1993. *Tribune-Herald* reporters Mark England and Darlene McCormick investigated the Branch Davidians for eight months, preparing what would become the seven-part "Sinful Messiah" series. The first installment of the series, which appeared on 27 February 1993, intended "to warn the community about Vernon Howell." The BATF investigation began in mid-1992. A United Parcel Service delivery driver had reported in May 1992 to the McLennan County Sheriff's Department suspicious shipments of firearms, grenade casings, and "substantial amounts" of black powder, an explosive. The sheriff's department asked the BATF to investigate. Because the Branch Davidians, "a potentially volatile group with strong professed religious beliefs," might possess large quantities of arms and explosives, BATF designated the case "sensitive" and "significant," assuring it would receive special attention.[8]

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[6] For Rodon quote, see "Howell Said to Have Lived Double Life," *WTH*, 2 May 1993. See also Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 33–5, 37–41.

[7] Robert V. Hine, *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone* (Norman, 1980), 6–14 (quote on p. 6).

[8] Both these articles appear in *WTH*: "Reporter Named in Lawsuit," 7 April 1993 and "Bloodiest Day for Agency," 1 March 1993. See also U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Report of the Department of the Treasury on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Investigation of Vernon Wayne Howell also known as David Koresh* (hereafter, *Treasury Report*) (Washington, DC, 1993), 17, 24, D-4.

Like the *Tribune-Herald*, the BATF concluded that Koresh held a mysterious power over his followers. The agent performing the initial investigation, Davey Aguilera, reported in December 1992 that all Mount Carmel's residents were "fiercely loyal to Koresh and devoted to his religious teachings." Agent Robert Rodriguez, who infiltrated Mount Carmel feigning interest in Koresh's teaching and who attended at least four Bible study sessions at Mount Carmel, said many of the Davidians seemed intelligent, but completely under Koresh's sway. Koresh's hypnotic powers proved almost too powerful for even Rodriguez, who said that being able to leave Mount Carmel as he pleased probably saved him. Had he been unable to escape Koresh's unrelenting Bible studies, he suggested that he might have become a Branch Davidian when Koresh invited him to join the group. Fellow agents kept a close eye on Rodriguez, reminding him from time to time that Koresh's teachings were just his interpretations. "[The other agents] would talk to me, bring me back," Rodriguez told the *Tribune-Herald*.[9]

The investigation gave the BATF enough information to conclude that Koresh and his followers were manufacturing weapons illegally at Mount Carmel. It also led the BATF to focus on Koresh, "because of his propensity toward violence and *his ability to control others*." (Emphasis added.) The initial BATF report on the Branch Davidians emphasized that members often gave Koresh all their assets and "permitted" him to have sex with all women in the group, which BATF termed a cult. This behavior, coupled with allegations that Koresh physically and sexually abused children, "showed Koresh to have set up a world of his own, where legal prohibitions were disregarded freely."[10] As had happened with nineteenth-century Mormons and American Indians, sexual relationships dictated by religious belief produced significant behaviors that set the Branch Davidians apart from mainstream America and contributed to the government's justification for action against them.

At the end of January 1993, the BATF began planning how it would serve search and arrest warrants on Koresh and the Branch Davidians. For several reasons, the agents in charge opted for what is known in law enforcement circles as a "dynamic entry." To people outside law enforcement circles, especially people on the receiving end of a dynamic entry, the procedure appears remarkably like an attack. The planned dynamic entry called for one detachment of agents to climb onto Mount Carmel's roof and enter the arms room and Koresh's room through separate windows. Those agents would use "flashbangs," grenades that produce a loud explosion and flash of light but no fragments, as a diversionary device while other agents would enter the front door and secure the rest of Mount Carmel. Unlike the typical dynamic entry, which began before sunrise, the BATF action against the Branch Davidians would begin at 10 A.M.,

[9] *Treasury Report*, 38, D-11 and "Undercover ATF Agent Haunted by Bullet that Never Came," *WTH*, 14 May 1993.

[10] *Treasury Report*, 12, 27.

when the planners hoped most of the male Branch Davidians would be working on a construction project and, therefore, a long way from the group's weapons.[11]

According to the account in the *Tribune-Herald*, the BATF raided Mount Carmel at 9:55 A.M. on 28 February. With three helicopters circling on the horizon, two cattle trucks holding about one hundred BATF agents pulled into the property. At least one agent had prepared for the raid with a prayer, asking God to protect him and to look after his wife and three sons. As the trucks approached the residence, the helicopters closed in on the compound, one hovering near the building. Agents piled out of the trucks, throwing concussion grenades and shouting, "Come out!" The Branch Davidians answered with a hail of gunfire, reported to be from automatic weapons. Agents hunkered down for what would be a 45-minute firefight, followed by more sporadic shooting. Four agents and at least two Branch Davidians died, and twenty more agents and at least three Branch Davidians suffered wounds in the battle. This marked the deadliest day in BATF history.[12] As for the Branch Davidians' hostile response to the raid, Koresh later explained to his attorney:

> I don't care who they are. Nobody is going to come to my home, with my babies around, shaking guns around, without a gun back in their face. That's just the American way.[13]

The siege was on.

For the next fifty-one days the U. S. government made a massive show of force against the Branch Davidians. Within a day of the raid, the FBI took over from the BATF. More than seven hundred law enforcement personnel took part, with 250 to 300 FBI agents present at any given time. The FBI agents enjoyed the support of the BATF, U. S. Customs officials, Waco police, personnel from the McLennan County Sheriff's Office, Texas Rangers, the Texas Department of Public Safety, the U. S. Army, and the Texas National Guard. The government also sent to Mount Carmel nine Bradley fighting vehicles, five M728 combat engineer vehicles, a tank retrieval vehicle, and two Abrams tanks. Reporters also swarmed to the scene. By mid-afternoon on the day of the raid, an estimated sixty reporters and camera crews from at least seventeen television stations and CNN had arrived to cover the event.[14]

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[11] *Treasury Report*, 53, 59, 65, 125, 127 and "Residents, Businessmen Say Howell Not a Recluse," *WTH*, 4 March 1993.

[12] The Branch Davidian who gave directions to the cameraman reported the raid to Koresh, who, in turn, told undercover Agent Robert Rodriguez that he knew a raid was in the works. Rodriguez reported this, but the agents in charge proceeded with the raid. *Treasury Report*, 85, 90, 215. Both of these articles appear in the *WTH*: "6 Dead, 18 Hurt," 1 March 1993 and "Agents Say Raid Like a War Zone," 2 May 1993.

[13] "Lawyer Releases Howell Tape," *WTH*, 28 May 1993.

[14] U.S. Department of Justice, *Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco, Texas, February 28 to April 19, 1993*, Redacted Version (hereafter, *Justice Report*) (Washington, DC, 1993), 2, 10, Appendix B and *Treasury Report*, 115, 117.

From the beginning, Koresh believed the raid was about religion. During a 9-1-1 call made during the first hours of the raid, a frantic Koresh told Larry Lynch of the McLennan County Sheriff's Department:

> We've known about this. I've been teaching about it for four years. We knew you were coming and everything. You see, we knew before you even knew.[15]

Later in the same conversation, Koresh told Lynch, "Theology is life and death" and went on to say that the Davidians would "serve God first." Koresh put the raid and standoff in perspective for the Branch Davidians, telling them that both the attack and the Davidian resistance constituted part of the apocalyptic struggle with the government that he had been predicting for years.[16] Those inside viewed the world and their place in it exclusively in religious terms. Those outside, namely law-enforcement officials, saw events in more secular terms, but in terms influenced by mainstream American values. To them, the Branch Davidians were cultists, insane or deluded (the rank and file), or frauds (Koresh).

Early in the siege, when Koresh promised to surrender on 2 March, negotiations appeared to be on the brink of ending the standoff—if authorities allowed him to broadcast an hour-long sermon on several radio stations. At the last moment, however, Koresh told authorities that he had received a message from God instructing him to wait. He later added that he would not leave Mount Carmel until instructed by God to do so.[17]

Government negotiators quickly grew frustrated with Koresh's focus on religious matters, often, seemingly, to the exclusion of resolving the conflict at hand. Bob Ricks, spokesman for the FBI, complained that following government offers, Koresh often "[went] into a discussion of Scripture." Before the siege was a week old, negotiators found themselves on the receiving end of a four-hour sermon from Koresh. They also heard complaints from Wayne Martin, a Harvard-educated lawyer and Branch Davidian, that America's political system was in decay and in conflict with God's law and that God had chosen Koresh to rule over His kingdom on earth. Martin told the negotiators that they, and America, were witnessing the birth of a new nation founded on the Seven Seals discussed in the Book of Revelation. Furthermore, Martin told the agents that they were enemies of the Seven Seals and would go to hell if they caused "aggression."[18] Also during that first week, Koresh told negotiators he was Christ.

[15] "9-1-1 Records Panic, Horror," *WTH*, 10 June 1993.

[16] For quotes, see ibid. See also *Justice Report*, 209.

[17] Both of these articles appear in *WTH*: "Officers Watch and Wait," 4 March 1993 and "Feds Vow to Give Cult Fair Shake," 7 March 1993.

[18] For Ricks quote, see "Talks with Cult Falter, Agents Say," *WTH*, 8 March 1993. See also, *Justice Report*, 41–2 (Martin quote on p. 42).

According to a transcript released by the Justice Department, the following exchange took place between Koresh and an FBI negotiator:

> FBI: And you claim that you're the Lord.
> Koresh: I am Christ.
> FBI: Well, you didn't say that. You said you claimed to be the Lord.
> Koresh: Christ is the same as the Lord. King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The Prince of the Kings of the earth. Yep. What can I say? Shall I lie? No, I will not lie. And, as I said before, my father sits on a throne and he said to wait.[19]

The negotiators remained calm, complimenting Koresh on his knowledge of the Bible, and urging him to come out. Koresh, meanwhile, tried to convert the negotiators to his religion. It would prove a tough conversion, though: one religious expert, James D. Tabor, accused the FBI agents of knowing so little about scriptures that some thought the Seven Seals were "seagoing creatures with whiskers."[20]

In an effort to remedy that situation and to understand Koresh, FBI agents studied the Seven Seals, the core of Koresh's teachings, and Isaiah, source of the name David Koresh.[21] FBI negotiator James Cavanaugh later acknowledged in congressional testimony that he and other negotiators recognized that they were dealing with a religious group subscribing to beliefs outside the mainstream: "I fully respected their religious beliefs, whatever degree there was of religious beliefs." Cavanaugh added, "I do not mean to be sarcastic, but my feeling was they can worship a golden chicken if they want to, but they cannot have submachine guns and hand grenades and shoot Federal agents."[22] While recognizing the importance of religion to Koresh, how much federal negotiators respected Branch Davidian beliefs remains more difficult to ascertain.

Law enforcement agents soon grew frustrated with theological discussions and tried to steer the talks toward negotiating a settlement. The FBI increased pressure on the Davidians through psychological harassment such as shining bright spotlights on Mount Carmel through much of the night to deprive inhabitants of sleep. FBI spokesman Richard Swenson showed the increasing frustration among government agents when he said, "[W]e're not here to be converted. . .we want to talk about substantive issues." FBI agents believed they had spent enough time listening to Koresh's religious

[19] *Justice Report*, 54–5.

[20] Ibid., 49 and for quotes, see "The Book of Koresh," *Newsweek* 122 (11 October 1993): 27.

[21] "Negotiators Taking Course in Revelation," *WTH*, 14 March 1993.

[22] U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Judiciary, *Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Toward the Branch Davidians: Joint Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Crime of the Committee on the Judiciary and the Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight (part 2)*, 104th Cong., 1st sess., 25, 26 and 27 July 1995 (hereafter, *Hearings, part 2*), 362.

doctrines. By trying to limit religious discussions and increasing pressure on the people in Mount Carmel, the FBI attempted to show the Davidians that federal agents were "in control of the situation."[23] Understandable as this might be, it indicates that the FBI missed the point of discussing *anything* with Koresh, whose life revolved around religion. In Koresh's view, when he discussed the Seven Seals with federal agents, he *was* discussing substantive issues, arguably the most substantive issues he could conceive—the end of the world and eternal salvation.

Meanwhile, at least some in the FBI concluded that they had to deal with Koresh and his theology, which could be extremely dangerous to the people inside Mount Carmel. According to Bob Ricks, special-agent-in-charge of the FBI's Oklahoma City office:

> We believe that for [Koresh], it would be a marvelous achievement if he could get a substantial number of his people killed. . . . What we have right now confronting us is that we are required to prove that David is not Christ, which is an impossible task. I don't believe there's anybody out there in the world that could prove to his satisfaction that he's not Christ. . . . When you're God, it's very difficult to have someone come forth and prove you're not God.[24]

Ricks's quote shows the FBI was acutely aware they were dealing with a man and a group heavily influenced by strong religious beliefs. It also raises the question why, when some FBI agents held the theory that Koresh thought he might benefit from having some of his followers killed, the FBI would attempt to oust the Branch Davidians from Mount Carmel with the aggressive tactics they would employ to end the siege.

By mid-April, FBI agents had proposed a plan to Attorney General Janet Reno to use tear gas to flush the Branch Davidians from their building. "We had run out of other plans," an FBI official told a *Time* reporter. This suggests the FBI did not consider more waiting an option. Reno asked hundreds of questions of the FBI planners. She mulled over the plan for a couple of days, and then grilled army special forces experts about the plan. FBI officials told Reno that the longer the siege lasted, the worse conditions would be for children inside Mount Carmel. Finally, with assurances that the gas would be non-lethal and would cause no long-term harm to the children, Reno approved the attack on 17 April. Justifying her decision, Reno explained, "Short of allowing David Koresh to go free, he is not coming out voluntarily."[25] Reno's decision guaranteed her prediction.

On Sunday, 18 April, armored vehicles began removing the Davidians' cars that were parked near the compound. The FBI wanted the grounds cleared for the planned "insertion" of gas the next day. The FBI warned the Branch Davidians to

[23] "FBI Playing Mind Games on Cultists," *WTH*, 16 March 1993.

[24] "FBI: Howell Cares Only for Own Life," *WTH*, 28 March 1993.

[25] Nancy Gibbs, "Firestorm in Waco," *Time* 141 (3 May 1993): 33–40 (quote on p. 33) and Paul Anderson, *Janet Reno: Doing the Right Thing* (New York, 1994), 191.

stay inside while the armored vehicles cleared the cars, which included Koresh's own Chevy Camaro. Inside Mount Carmel, adults held children up to the windows. In one window, an FBI sniper saw a cardboard sign, decorated with flames, which read, "Flames Await." [26]

While the negotiations and siege wore on, the people of Waco reacted in a variety of ways to events at Mount Carmel. Waco-area residents found themselves suddenly immersed in a circus of reporters and law enforcement agents obsessed with their neighbors at Mount Carmel. Though area residents had previously considered those at the compound merely eccentric, the Davidians now appeared ominously dangerous. Some believed the government had overstepped its bounds. Most, however, closed ranks behind mainstream religious and social values and supported the actions of the federal agents.[27] Reactions in and around Waco to the events at the Branch Davidian property also reflect the complexity of the situation and provide insight to westerners' mindsets in the late twentieth century.

When neighbors nearest Mount Carmel registered surprise that the Davidians caused such a fuss, they were demonstrating that the ideals of the mythic West survive. The proprietor of a store in nearby Elk, Texas, said the Davidians had never caused him any problems before the raid. One of his customers saw merit to each side's case in the standoff. "I think the sneak attack was wrong," Kenneth Ellis told a reporter, adding, "This is America. They should have given them a chance to surrender." Another Elk business owner shared that sentiment. Dennis Moore, a tavern keeper, believed the Davidians were justified in protecting their property. Moore also disagreed with labeling the Davidians a cult. "We always referred to it as a religious commune, not a cult," he said. Moore then predicted "the federal people are going to go in and murder what's left over [at Mount Carmel]."[28] These westerners believed their neighbors had a right to do as they pleased, as long as they did not bother anyone. They also believed they could and should defend their property from aggressors, even if, perhaps *especially* if, they happened to be the government, which might impose its will even more harshly than it already had. Essentially, they agreed with Koresh's interpretation of what constituted "the American way."

Other central Texas residents reacted differently. After learning about the raid on the Branch Davidians, the people of Waco, a city "[m]ainstream in its Protestantism," according to the *Tribune-Herald*, "struggled with disbelief . . . that a fanatic named Vernon Howell chose to live out his confusing and self-destructive prophecy so nearby."[29] Part of the town's struggle saw mainstream Protestant Waco close ranks to

[26] *Justice Report*, 109.

[27] As of 9 March 1993, the Waco Chamber of Commerce and Salvation Army counted approximately four hundred media representatives from around the United States, Canada, Mexico, Great Britain, France, Germany, South Africa, and Australia. "Spotlight on Waco," *WTH*, 9 March 1993.

[28] "Elk neighbors at center of sudden notoriety," *WTH*, 3 March 1993.

[29] "Tragedy Nearby Stuns Citizens," *WTH*, 2 March 1993.

support those who had come to exorcise its demon. A hospital gave shelter to reporters. A pizza parlor sent free food to law enforcement officers. A company sent free cellular phones to officials involved in the siege. And a Baptist group worked to provide enough pastors to comfort the injured and bereaved.[30]

Waco's mainstream political and religious communities united to pray for an end to the siege. St. Paul's Episcopal Church held prayer vigils every day at 5:30 P.M. to seek a peaceful end. At least eight other Waco churches scheduled prayer vigils, too, many of them daily.[31] Other Waco ministers later organized a "Service of Unity," hoping to use spiritual means to end the standoff.[32] Mayor Bob Sheehy wrote a letter to all Waco churches asking them to pray for a quick resolution to the standoff at Mount Carmel. At Waco's First Baptist Church, Kent Starr, chairman of the deacons, prayed for the families of the slain agents and asked God to be with the Davidians and to guide the conflict to a peaceful end. At Central Christian Church, pastor Jerry Deffenbaugh explained the situation at Mount Carmel to his congregation this way:

> When congregations or religious groups wave the flag of being independent, they often end up doing crazy things. If you are not accountable to a larger body or fellowship, then perversion can easily set in.[33]

Could Americans, let alone Texans or westerners, have too much independence? Mainstream Waco sent a clear message that first Sunday after the raid: Religious freedom extends only as far as the mainstream deems fit. Practices beyond those bounds were "crazy," amounting to "perversion," and would be dealt with accordingly.

Within a week of the initial incident, local hospitality rose to the challenge of supporting the six hundred law enforcement officers who had converged upon Waco. McLennan County Commissioner Ray Meadows organized a food drive to gather canned and prepared food for the officers. Organizers planned to add collections to donations made by the Waco Restaurant Association. "I just feel like our law enforcement people need to know the county residents are behind them," Meadows said of his effort.[34] During the siege's first month, Michna's Bar-B-Que had donated 1,050 plate lunches to law enforcement officers and journalists, the McLennan County Extension Service fed the agents beans and cornbread, high school home economics classes baked 325 dozen cookies during one week, and Church's Chicken donated 450 meals on a single day. Local gyms let agents work out for free, and a dry cleaner donated several thousand dollars in services to agents. Grocery stores, other restaurants, and retail

[30] Ibid.

[31] Both of these articles appear in *WTH*: "Prayer Vigils Planned," 8 March 1993 and "Area Prayer Vigils," 15 March 1993.

[32] "Prayers for Peace," *WTH*, 14 March 1993.

[33] "Area Churches Pray for End to Siege," *WTH*, 8 March 1993.

[34] "Food Donations Sought," *WTH*, 6 March 1993.

stores also donated food to federal forces in the standoff. A representative of the Waco Restaurant Association estimated that members donated $60,000 worth of products to support the siege.[35] Mainstream Waco quickly closed ranks to support law enforcement as it confronted the eccentric religious group just outside the city.

Virulent opponents of the Branch Davidians also voiced their feelings about the standoff and how to end it quickly. Jim Denton, of Elm Mott, Texas, wrote that the taxpayers had tired of seeing millions of dollars spent on the standoff with the "criminal cult." If the Davidians refused to surrender, Denton suggested, "we burn them to the ground."[36] Waco-area landowner Dawn Bryant painted her sentiment about the situation on the window of her pickup truck: "Kill Koresh."[37]

In a column written about six weeks into the standoff, Roland Nethaway, the *Tribune-Herald*'s senior editor, pondered the situation's meaning. He concluded that it revealed "differing views citizens have over what it means to be an American." Specifically, Nethaway wrote:

> The 45-minute Sunday morning shoot-out at the religious cult's Mount Carmel compound—Ranch Apocalypse—touched on practically every issue our Founding Fathers put into those original amendments. Religion, speech, guns, assembly, security of homes, personal security, search and seizure—it's all there, and more.[38]

Nethaway believed that if local authorities had acted on previous complaints regarding child abuse, sexual molestation of children, statutory rape, polygamy, and bogus marriages, the public would not have protested. But the federal government's heavy-handed tactics, combined with post-raid deceptions to the public by the BATF, made the public suspicious about the government's excessive use of force and its justification. If the Mount Carmel episode prompted debate about the relationship between individual liberties and government responsibilities, perhaps some good might come of it, Nethaway suggested.[39]

Some pundits perceived the standoff as part of a violent "Texas myth" that includes events such as President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, the sniper attack at the University of Texas, and, as recently as 1991, the gunman who killed nearly two dozen diners at a cafeteria in Killeen. Sharon Jenkins, associate professor of psychology at the University of North Texas at the time of the siege, said, "Texas builds a myth around these kinds of individuals." According to Jenkins, the report that Koresh smiled defiantly at BATF agents before slamming Mount Carmel's front door in their faces fits

[35] Both of these articles appear in *WTH*: "A Taste of Central Texas," 1 April 1993 and "ATF Departs with Signs of Gratitude," 12 June 1993.

[36] Jim Denton, Letter to the Editor, *WTH*, 14 March 1993.

[37] Photograph, *WTH*, 15 March 1993, p. 4A.

[38] "It Concerns Our Liberty," *WTH*, 9 April 1993.

[39] Ibid.

into that myth. Jenkins said, "There is some part of that myth that romanticizes slamming the door in the face of the law and smiling." A British journalist who came to Waco to cover the Branch Davidian siege said he was drawn by the "Texas myth" and the state's "Wild West image." American violence in general, he told a reporter, is "just beyond the understanding of people in western Europe." In *The New Republic*, columnist Leon Wieseltier wrote, tongue-in-cheek: "Who exactly were the Davidians bothering? The administration says they were hoarding guns. How un-American and how un-Texan." In Washington, D.C., columnist R. Emmett Tyrell, Jr., asked rhetorically, "If Americans cannot live the life of the rugged—albeit somewhat loony—individualist in the vast reaches of the great West, where can they live normal American lives?" Some Texans, as if to support these opinions, suggested that the FBI end the siege as the Mexican forces ended the siege at the Alamo—by playing the march "Deguello" (which signaled "no quarter") over the loudspeakers set up at Mount Carmel and ordering a final, decisive assault on the group.[40] The siege at Mount Carmel struck a responsive chord with many Americans who objected to the government's apparent trampling of cherished liberties and who appeared especially concerned that it happened in the American West, where they expected the flame of those freedoms to burn at its brightest.

As the siege dragged on, law enforcement officials became impatient with the lack of progress and with Koresh's broken promises to leave Mount Carmel. On 19 April, fifty-one days after the BATF action, law officers proceeded with the "gas insertion," in law enforcement parlance, that precipitated the fire. Whether started by Branch Davidians or by the federal attack, the fire's intense heat burned Branch Davidians beyond recognition; many burned to dust.[41] A number of Branch Davidians died of gunshot wounds, including Koresh, who had been shot between the eyes.[42]

President Bill Clinton issued a statement supportive of federal law enforcement tactics the day after the fire. Clinton called Koresh "dangerous, irrational, and probably insane" and charged that Koresh had engaged in activities violating federal law and "common standards of decency." He also placed responsibility for the Davidians' deaths solely on Koresh's shoulders. As the president closed his prepared remarks on the fire, he

[40] For journalist and Jenkins quote, see "Cult Standoff Expands Violent Texas Myth," *WTH*, 8 March 1993. For Tyrell quote, see *Treasury Report*, 120. For Deguello quote, see "The Messiah's Book," *WTH*, 16 April 1993. For Wieseltier quote, see Leon Wieseltier, "The True Fire," *The New Republic*, 17 May 1993, 25. See also, Jan Jarboe, "David Koresh and the Myth of the Alamo," *Texas Monthly* 21 (June 1993): 136–8, 191. Scholarly discussions of the myth of the West can be found in Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land:The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA, 1950); Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence, 1986); and works by Richard Slotkin: *Regeneration Through Violence; The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York, 1985); and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1992).

[41] "JPs Find Search 'Beyond Horror,'" *WTH*, 24 April 1993.

[42] "Howell Died of Gunshot, Officials Say," *WTH*, 3 May 1993.

pointed to the Branch Davidian tragedy as an example from which to learn, saying, "I hope very much that others who will be tempted to join cults and to become involved with people like David Koresh will be deterred by the horrible scenes they have seen over the last seven weeks."[43]

The president's remarks rang true to his position as chief defender of the Christian mainstream. Clinton, a Southern Baptist, met regularly with spiritual advisors, most from Protestant denominations. These advisors most often provided spiritual counsel, but also offered opinions on policy matters, most notably abortion. The Rev. Rex Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas, which Clinton attended while governor of Arkansas, spoke on the telephone with the president for fifteen minutes every Saturday night when Clinton was in Washington, D.C. Clinton also met monthly with the Rev. Bill Hybels, senior pastor of the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. During their hour-long meetings, the men prayed and discussed politics.[44] This brings to life the ethereal concept Eric Foner calls "a moral or 'Christian' ideal of freedom" and Gunnar Myrdal called "the American Creed" that shapes American mainstream cultural values.[45]

Despite the heavy criticism, Janet Reno's willingness to accept full responsibility boosted her reputation. In October 1993, *Newsweek* called her "by far the most popular member of Clinton's cabinet, a near folk hero ever since she assumed responsibility for the Waco disaster."[46] Mainstream America, hungry for law, order, and morality and ravenous for a responsible figure in Washington, admired the new attorney general.

The surviving Branch Davidians—about forty remained after the fire—reacted differently to news of the fire. In a telephone interview from jail, Davidian Brad Branch told CNN, "This is a systematic assassination by the FBI to eliminate all of the crime scene, now they're finishing off the job, destroying the crime scene."[47] In the immediate aftermath, Annetta Richards harbored doubts about whether Koresh actually perished in the flames. If he did, she expected his resurrection, partly because the events at Mount Carmel proved that Koresh had hit the mark with his prophecies. "My faith in the word is more firm because I have seen prophesies David has taught us have been fulfilled," Richards told a newspaper reporter days after the fire.[48] More than a month after the fire,

[43] Congress, House, Committee on the Judiciary, *Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Toward the Branch Davidians: Joint Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Crime of the Committee on the Judiciary and the Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight (Part 3)*, 104th Cong., 1st sess., 28, 31 July and 1 August 1995, 288–9.

[44] "Not All Presidential Advisers Talk Politics," *New York Times*, National Edition, 18 March 1997, A16.

[45] Foner, *The Story of American Freedom*, xvii–xix (Myrdal quote on p. xix).

[46] *Hearings, part 2*, 477 and "The Contrary Voice of Janet Reno," *Newsweek* 122 (11 October 1993): 30.

[47] "A Fiery End," *WTH*, Special Report, 19 April 1993.

[48] "Follower Awaits Howell's Return," *WTH*, 22 April 1993.

others believed God and Koresh were planning a return to resume building an earthly kingdom.[49] Renos Avraam, one of two Davidians convicted for aiding and abetting voluntary manslaughter, said:

> When David Koresh comes back, a lot of people are going to be put to shame. They'll realize that this guy . . . he was no charlatan. If you saw David Koresh coming in a cloud of great glory, it would have you thinking, wouldn't it? He's going to come in great majesty and glory, and he'll be like a ghost rider in the sky. When he comes, it's going to be awesome.[50]

The raid, siege, and fire had the unexpected effect of affirming or strengthening some Davidians in their faith. Avraam's comment shows how he conflated religion and cowboy imagery, although it raises questions about his intent. The cowboys in the song "[Ghost] Riders in the Sky" had been damned to chase the devil's herd for eternity.[51]

The Branch Davidian children who survived the fire found themselves under state care while their parents tried to satisfy state officials that they were fit parents. State childcare officials said they were trying to walk a fine line between respecting the Branch Davidian's religious beliefs and ensuring the children's safety. Parents seeking to regain custody of their children had to prove to the satisfaction of state officials that they had "firm ties to reality." Sheila Martin, who lost her husband and three children in the fire, had to explain her emotionless reaction to state officials. Martin replied that she would see them again on the day of resurrection. According to Jesse Guardiola, a supervisor for Texas Child Protective Services in Waco, Martin "modified [her answer] from waiting on the resurrection of David Koresh to how it is in the Bible." Guardiola further explained:

> It is not our intent to judge their religious beliefs or values. But in looking at social norms, we have to decide, "Are they with us or not?" If they are off on a philosophy at odds with social norms, it will be a concern for us.[52]

In effect, Texas officials told surviving Davidian parents to modify their religious beliefs and participate in the "social norm," or face losing custody of their children.

After the fire, the *Tribune-Herald* continued to vilify Koresh, depicting him in a biographical article as a schizophrenic. *Tribune-Herald* reporters concluded that Koresh led a "double life," sometimes Vernon Howell, "eager-to-please small-town

[49] "Surviving Branch Davidians Await Howell's 2nd Coming," *WTH*, 23 May 1993.

[50] "Awaiting Koresh's Resurrection," *WTH*, 28 February 1994.

[51] Stan Jones, "(Ghost) Riders in the Sky," performed by Johnny Cash, *The Essential Johnny Cash, 1955–1983*, Columbia compact disc C3K65557.

[52] "Custody Tied To 'Reality,'" *WTH*, 11 June 1993.

boy," sometimes David Koresh, "calculating cult leader." The paper produced no such story about the federal agents who raided Mount Carmel. The paper did not portray them as church-going family men who earned a living donning bullet-proof vests and making heavily armed assaults on other human beings to protect society. It did report, however, that before the 28 February raid at least one BATF agent prayed to God, asking protection for himself and his family.[53] This is not to say that societies do not need law enforcement officials or to preclude the possibility that those at Mount Carmel provided a needed service, but merely to point out that the newspaper emphasized perceived incongruities in Koresh's life, the life of the "freak," while overlooking possible incongruities in the lives of "normal" BATF agents.

Mainstream print journalists deemed the *Tribune-Herald*'s "Sinful Messiah" series an award-winning work of public service. The Associated Press in September 1993 gave its annual Managing Editors' Award for public service to the community, state or nation to reporters Mark England and Darlene McCormick for their work on the series. At the heart of that series, in addition to weapons allegations, lay the Davidians' social "abnormalities," particularly regarding family structure. The Davidians offended the reporter's—and mainstream society's—sensibilities regarding family relationships. For fighting those evils, England and McCormick received one of their profession's highest honors. In this instance, evidence seems to indicate they did, in fact, ferret out the threat of possible child abuse and statutory rape.[54]

In the months following the fire, Waco's mainstream spiritual leaders did their best to help their followers deal with the tragedy at Mount Carmel. Some organized an ecumenical prayer service for 20 April at Central Presbyterian Church in hopes of helping members of the community begin dealing with the tragedy at Mount Carmel. More than one hundred people attended the service, including Texas Governor Ann Richards, a Waco native.[55] Others, like Norman Klein, rabbi of Temple Rodef Sholom in Waco, responded in print. Klein berated the news media because it "took Koresh's 'religious' ramblings seriously." He labeled Koresh a "cult leader," called the Branch Davidians "brainwashed," and defined "[t]rue religious leaders" as those who "empower their congregants and listeners to follow their own spiritual direction."[56]

What did the Branch Davidian tragedy mean to America? To editors at Waco's *Tribune-Herald*, it meant "major changes needed to be made in the way law enforcement agencies handle people who have beliefs outside of mainstream America." The editors feared that "Rambo-style assaults by law enforcement agencies" seriously hurt the government's credibility with law-abiding Americans. The government further eroded

[53] Both these articles appear in *WTH*: "Howell Said to Have Lived Double Life," 2 May 1993 and "Agents Say Raid Like a War Zone," 2 May 1993.

[54] "Trib Writers Honored for Series," *WTH*, 24 September 1993.

[55] Both these articles appear in *WTH*: "Prayer Service to Start Healing," 20 April 1993 and "Pastors Dedicate Service to Fallen Cult Members," 21 April 1993.

[56] "Unavoidable Sense of Guilt Causes Peace to Elude Us," *WTH*, 8 May 1993.

public trust by lying to cover its mistakes. The final important lesson taught by the Branch Davidian tragedy was "the need to keep law enforcement as local as possible." County and state agencies had opportunities to, but did not, settle the conflicts at Mount Carmel well before they got out of hand.

On the other hand, national public-opinion polls conducted shortly after the fire showed "an overwhelming majority of Americans found no fault with the way law-enforcement authorities had brought the standoff to a head."[57] That the *Tribune-Herald*, which had dedicated itself to exposing the problems at Mount Carmel and had portrayed Koresh with hostility and his followers as pitiable dupes, could suggest law enforcement agencies treat non-mainstream groups better shows compassion. It also reveals the familiar western desire to keep the government, particularly the federal government, out of local affairs. The public-opinion poll shows a great divide in America on fundamental issues: the right to practice religion freely, the right to bear arms, and the right to protection from unreasonable search and seizure. Just as millions lauded law-enforcement agents for their tough stand, millions of others criticized them for trampling basic rights.

To Kiri Jewell, as she progressed through her teenage years, it meant reliving the horrors she experienced at Koresh's hands. As the Branch Davidian tragedy remained a topic of debate, militia groups claimed that no proof existed that Koresh had sexually abused underage girls or planned an armed conflict with the U. S. government. Jewell, upset, decided to fight those opinions by retelling her story, in full, graphic detail, to Congress as it convened hearings on the Branch Davidian tragedy. Jewell testified that Koresh had sex with her in a motel room when she was ten years old. She also said Koresh taught that the group would fight, and lose, a battle with the federal government. Koresh called the government "Babylon," she said, and there was never a time when the Davidians did not expect to be killed by "the Feds." Among other things, Koresh and the Davidians spread word among themselves, including children such as Jewell, that if it became necessary to commit suicide during the battle with Babylon, the best method was "to put the gun in your mouth, back to the soft spot above your throat, before pulling the trigger." When people testifying before and after Jewell argued that the actions against Mount Carmel endangered the country's religious freedoms, Kiri's father, David Jewell, seethed, "Koresh's religion was a disease."[58]

To people holding anti-government views, the Branch Davidian tragedy strengthened

[57] For first three quotes, see "Out of the Ashes," *WTH*, 1 March 1994 and for fourth quote, see "As Millions Cheer," *The Progressive* 57 (June 1993): 8.

[58] All of these articles appear in the *WTH*: "Teen's Words Bring Cult's Sins to Light," 20 July 1995 (see for first three quotes); "Girl's Testimony Source of Pride, Relief," 21 July 1995; "Kiri Jewell Does 'What Feels Right,'" 30 July 1995 (see for last quote). See also Congress, House, Committee on the Judiciary, *Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Toward the Branch Davidians: Joint Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Crime of the Committee on the Judiciary and the Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight (Part 1)*, 104th Cong., 1st sess., 19, 20, 21, and 24 July 1995, 147–50.

their convictions. In its most grotesquely dramatic incarnation, the episode played a major role in motivating Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. McVeigh, a former army sergeant and veteran of the Gulf War with anti-government views, reportedly grew furious over the events at Mount Carmel. He traveled to Waco during the siege to protest and was videotaped distributing bumper stickers that read, "Is Your Church ATF-Approved?" He detonated the Oklahoma City bomb on 19 April 1995, the second anniversary of the Mount Carmel fire.[59]

The conflict certainly meant many things and took on different shades according to the individual, but one member of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team, Special Agent Christopher Whitcomb, a sniper, left a detailed account that grants insight to at least one law enforcement viewpoint. In his memoir *Cold Zero: Inside the FBI Hostage Rescue Team*, Whitcomb reflected on Koresh and the siege from the perspective of someone who had Koresh in the crosshairs of his high-powered rifle, which he referred to as "The Truth." Whitcomb and other government agents at the siege had devoted themselves to an occupation that was part profession, part cause. They were willing to sacrifice their lives to help people and to serve their country. As the siege approached Easter, Whitcomb reflected on Easters past, times for family outings and celebrations of "the beauty of one man's remarkable sacrifice." Although that Easter in Waco meant little more for Whitcomb than any other day on an undesirable assignment, he marked time's passing by a mainstream Christian holiday. He also conceived Koresh as someone who manipulated religion, describing him as "a salesman" and "a bullshit artist," comparable to "a time-share pimp, selling chunks of salvation." In his imagination, Whitcomb saw Koresh luring prospective converts to a weekend at Ranch Apocalypse to hear his spiel, then convincing them to sign away their souls. On the night of 18 April, the eve of the fateful engagement, Whitcomb wrote of the members of his team, ". . . everyone climbed into their sleeping bags full of the anticipation children feel on Christmas Eve."[60]

Mainstream Waco, Texas, and America, closed ranks in condemning the Branch Davidians as freaks. As recorded in the media, most central Texans wished to avoid violence at Mount Carmel, but supported the actions of law enforcement officers as they sought to bring this marginal religious group to heel. Mainstream clergy and politicians joined forces in Waco to lead prayer vigils—presumably to a deity unsympathetic to the Branch Davidians' approach to theology—for a peaceful end to the confrontation outside town. Civic groups, businesses, and average citizens showed their support for law enforcement by feeding officers and trying to make them feel at home during the long standoff.

A presumably smaller, albeit vocal, group objected to federal actions. These indi-

[59] "Oklahoma Prison Transfers Davidians," *WTH*, 5 May 1995 and Mark S. Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma: Waco and Ruby Ridge Revenged* (Boston, 1997), 103–5.

[60] Whitcomb, 201, 281–2, 286, 302.

vidualists, represented by Libertarian politicians and party members, militia types, and others, condemned what they viewed as a high-handed federal attack on fundamental liberties outlined in the Bill of Rights: free speech, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, and the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures. They saw a government, represented largely by two law enforcement agencies, acting with blatant disregard for bedrock American values. The government aggravated their criticisms by firing, then rehiring with back pay and benefits, the two agents deemed responsible for the botched BATF raid that initiated the standoff.

Some saw in the Branch Davidian tragedy a microcosm of the mythic American West, representing, in turn, the true America. In Texas, perhaps more western than any other state, they saw gun-toting religious radicals pitted in a showdown with an even more heavily armed state in a conflict resolved in epic violence. It showed mainstream society, which cannot be labeled entirely secular, demarcating limits of religious tolerance. It exposed human frailties in the bureaucracy of justice. It fit the myth of the West and at the same time demonstrated its shortcomings.

Ultimately, the attack on 19 April, however unintentionally, drove the Branch Davidians to kill themselves. During the decades since their arrival in Texas, they had lived the dream of freedom promised by the mythical West and described by the scholars who have written about the West's remarkable religious diversity. When that dream turned to a nightmare in February 1993, many probably believed the apocalyptic battle Koresh had prophesied for years had finally arrived and that they were on their way to the millennium. If so, perhaps the American West delivered on its promise even in the horror of 19 April. Even if they had not experienced unfettered freedom to practice their religion and bear arms, they had found their Promised Land. Multifaceted responses to the tragedy showed competing visions of the West and its iconography and mythology still at work. Regardless of what precipitated the conflict and siege, religion played heavily in the minds of all involved and to many observing. The Branch Davidian tragedy showed that in the West, despite its well-deserved reputation for spiritual diversity, horizons and society have limits and there really is an American way.