

Six-year cover-up cracks

FBI admits use of incendiary grenades at Waco

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27 August 1999

Officials of the FBI and Justice Department admitted Wednesday that tear gas grenades with potentially incendiary effect were used in the final assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas six years ago. The fire that erupted in the compound killed 80 members of the religious sect.

The admission marked an abrupt reversal after more than six years of adamant claims by officials from Attorney General Janet Reno on down that nothing done by the FBI and other federal agencies involved in the Waco siege could have caused the fire.

With six years of systematic lying by federal agents now exposed, there is no reason to believe the new claims by Reno and FBI Director Louis Freeh that the tear gas grenades which FBI agents used on the morning of April 19, 1993 could not have caused the fire. They said that the grenades were fired only against a concrete bunker some distance from the main buildings in the compound, some six hours before the fatal blaze erupted. But as late as Monday, the FBI was denying that any grenades were fired at all.

Another and potentially even more damaging revelation about Waco appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* on Thursday. The newspaper reported that agents of the US Army's special operations Delta Force were on site at the Branch Davidian compound during the final assault. The Clinton administration has repeatedly denied that the military played any direct role in the Waco attack, which would violate a longstanding congressional prohibition on the use of the American military for domestic policing.

Two factors have contributed to the latest revelations about Waco. The first is a lawsuit filed by survivors of the massacre and relatives of the dead, seeking civil

damages from the government for the wrongful death of the 76 people, including 25 children, who perished on April 19, 1993.

The suit has been repeatedly delayed by the reluctance of the Clinton administration and the federal police agencies to release relevant evidence, but a jury trial is now scheduled to begin on October 18. The prospect of being compelled to give sworn testimony under oath and facing cross-examination has begun to break through the years of stonewalling by federal agents, some of whom have begun to talk to plaintiffs' attorneys and to the press.

On August 8 federal District Court Judge Walter Smith issued an extraordinary order requiring all federal agencies to transfer all Waco-related evidence to his control, where the materials will be in the possession of the US Marshal's office and available both to attorneys for the Branch Davidian plaintiffs and to the media.

The second factor is the intense conflict between extreme right-wing forces and the Clinton administration, which has found expression within various state and federal police agencies. Waco has been a cause celebre of the ultra-right and militia groups, because the Branch Davidians were a Christian religious sect and the attack on them was spearheaded by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the principal federal agency involved in gun control efforts.

(The BATF's initial raid on the Branch Davidian compound in February 1993, on a warrant charging sect leader David Koresh with illegal weapons purchases, was a disastrous failure, sparking a firefight which left four federal agents and six members of the religious cult dead and many other Davidians wounded,

including Koresh. The FBI took over management of the siege from the BATF and carried out the final assault.)

It was to "avenge" Waco that right-wing terrorist Timothy McVeigh carried out the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, two years later to the day, killing 188 people. After the Oklahoma City bombing House Republicans held well-publicized hearings, not into right-wing terrorism, but into Waco and an earlier clash between federal agents and white supremacist Randy Weaver in Ruby Ridge, Idaho. The hearings confirmed the close political ties between the congressional Republican leadership and extreme right and neo-fascist elements, connections which emerged more fully during the impeachment drive against the Clinton White House.

In Texas the cause of the Branch Davidians has been taken up, not so much by civil liberties groups like the ACLU—although they denounced the attack as unwarranted—as by the various state police agencies which have been investigating their federal counterparts. Complaints from the Texas Rangers and the Texas Public Safety Commission sparked Judge Smith's order that federal agencies turn over their evidence to him.

The source of the reports on the use of pyrotechnic grenades was the Public Safety Commission Chairman James B. Francis. "There are written reports by Rangers," Francis told the press, "there is photographic evidence, there is physical evidence, all three of which are problematic" for the federal government's claim that no grenades were used. A former senior FBI official, Danny Coulson, confirmed to the *Dallas Morning News* that he had recently learned that two military-type M-651 CS tear gas grenades had been fired on the day of the massacre.

Francis also reported the presence of the Delta Force at Waco. "Everyone involved knows they were there," he said. "If there is an issue, it was what their role was at the time." Declassified Defense Department documents have corroborated the presence of the Army special forces unit at the Branch Davidian compound, although Pentagon officials now claim only a handful of soldiers were there as "observers."

In perhaps the most chilling comment on the whole affair, the former FBI official Coulson confirmed the presence of the military, adding, "They come, frankly,

to learn. They come to watch us and learn in case they have to operate in a similar environment or if, for some reason, they have to operate here in the United States."

Congressional Republicans have seized on the latest exposure of FBI lying and stonewalling to demand a new round of congressional hearings on Waco. Taking the lead were Dan Burton of Indiana and Robert Barr of Georgia, who both have well-established ties to extreme right groups. It was Barr who was exposed last December as a close associate of the Council of Conservative Citizens, a Mississippi-based white supremacist group.

Attorney General Reno has announced her own investigation of the Waco tragedy, assigning 40 FBI agents to interview all those federal agents present on the final day of the siege—in other words, taking new testimony from those who have lied and covered up for the past six years.

No objective and truthful account of the Waco events can be expected from either of these factionally motivated inquiries. But the revelations which have already emerged give a glimpse of the threats to democratic rights which lie just beneath the surface of American political life.



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