

The political lessons of the Waco massacre

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In the days following the incineration of 86 people, including 25 children, at the Branch Davidian compound outside Waco, Texas, the explanations supplied by the Clinton administration and the FBI for launching the assault have begun to fall apart. Administration spokesmen like Attorney General Janet Reno, FBI Director William Sessions and Clinton himself have flatly contradicted each other on the circumstances of the attack, its timing and motivation.

The claims that the final assault on the religious cult was carried out to save the lives of the children or to stop their sexual abuse by Koresh have no credibility. The assault was mounted in a fashion which was deliberately provocative and with wanton disregard for the innocent lives which were placed in danger. There is no indication that FBI and Justice Department officials gave the slightest consideration to how the 25 children, including 17 under 10 years of age, could be saved, and there were no special tactics devised for this purpose. The FBI did not even call the Waco fire department until after the blaze began.

Judging from its statements, the White House apparently believes that the great mass of people are simply gullible fools. Clinton's absurd declaration placing sole blame for the massacre on David Koresh is self-serving and contradictory.

He denounced the Branch Davidian leader as "irrational and probably insane," claiming "he bears ultimate responsibility for the carnage that ensued." But if Koresh was insane, he was by definition not responsible for his actions. How could federal officials then expect him to respond rationally to an assault on the compound by an armored vehicle?

Moreover, there is mounting evidence to disprove the initial FBI claims that the deaths were the result of mass suicide. All six survivors who have spoken to defense attorneys have given similar accounts that the fire began when an armored vehicle smashed through a wall of the compound and ruptured a large

propane tank.

The survivors have also stated that the tank attack caused structural damage inside the compound that made it impossible to open doors once the fire began. The position of the bodies so far discovered, distributed widely throughout the compound, indicates that the victims were not herded together or held at gunpoint by Koresh and his closest aides. Rather the fire raced through the old wooden structure so swiftly that most were overcome by smoke and only a handful could make their way out.

On Thursday, the medical examiner in Waco angrily contradicted government claims that gunshot wounds had been found in several bodies.

Regardless of what started the fire, it was an armed assault by dozens of federal agents which began the confrontation February 28, and a second assault, spearheaded by armored vehicles, which set in motion the tragic events of April 19. Throughout the siege, the federal authorities rejected such elementary measures for defusing the situation as allowing relatives of the Branch Davidians to speak directly to cult members and seek to convince them to leave peacefully.

Any objective consideration of the Waco events leads inexorably to the conclusion that political considerations were behind the decision to launch a tank-led assault on April 19. Clinton administration officials were under growing pressure from the federal agents on the spot to settle accounts with Koresh. *The New York Times* reported, "It was not in the nature of the law enforcement officials, who had seen the federal agents killed during the initial raid on Feb. 28, to let the cult go on with its way of life." Other press accounts cited the determination of federal agents to wreak vengeance for the death of four BATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) officers and the wounding of 16 others. They spoke of "bringing things to a logical conclusion."

While the need to reassure the FBI and BATF played a role, so did the prospect that Koresh's continued defiance was undermining the authority of the federal government. "These people had thumbed their noses at law enforcement," said Larry Potts, the assistant director of the FBI's criminal division. *The Wall Street Journal* wrote, "An important factor in deciding to proceed, said one FBI agent, was the feeling among FBI and Justice Department officials that they should take back control

of the situation."

The press has been silent on the obvious connection between the Branch Davidian siege and the prison uprising in Lucasville, Ohio, which broke out in the final week of the Waco standoff. The rebellion by over 400 inmates fueled the concern of federal officials that their failure to suppress the Koresh group was encouraging others to challenge the authority of the state. Two days after the Waco massacre, the inmates at Lucasville surrendered, obviously preferring promises of a partial settlement of their grievances to serving as the targets of another exercise in mass slaughter.

There is an obvious and enormous discrepancy between the scale of the force used against the Branch Davidians and the actual threat which this tiny religious group represented. This disproportion reveals the tremendous nervousness of the capitalist ruling class, which presides over a society wracked by economic crisis and deepening poverty, unemployment and homelessness. So fearful is the ruling class of the explosive potential of the deep-rooted social antagonisms in America that it reacts with frenzied violence against any challenge, no matter how minor. It seeks to drive home the message, "Thus perish enemies of the state."

Waco is not the first such incident, but the latest in a series in which the ruling class has displayed its real character—violent, bloodthirsty and ruthless. From the National Guard assault on Attica in 1971 and the FBI siege of Wounded Knee in 1973 to the bombing of the MOVE group in Philadelphia in 1985 and this past week's destruction of the Davidian compound in Waco, such confrontations have ended the same way: in a hail of bullets or a funeral pyre.

Despite claims by Clinton that he had only brief discussions with Reno about the decision to launch the final assault, a report last month in the *Wall Street Journal* noted that he was following the Waco siege with great personal interest and was keeping informed about minute operational details. A Clinton crony from Arkansas, associate attorney general-designate Webb Hubbell, ran the Justice Department during the early part of the siege and sat in on the meeting with Reno Saturday evening where the final decision was taken.

The role of Clinton and the actions of his government come as no surprise to Marxists who proceed from a class analysis of all political phenomena. But such events invariably come as a shock to those who base their judgments on the superficial criteria of American radical politics. Taken in by the political packaging of the capitalist media, the middle class reformists hailed the election of Clinton as a shift to the left and gushed over his appointment of wealthy women, blacks and Hispanics to high cabinet positions.

But when put to the test, the Clinton administration, which boasts of the first woman attorney general, has proceeded just as ruthlessly as any of its predecessors. Indeed, this show of force is now being portrayed in the capitalist media as a sort of "rite of passage," demonstrating that the former antiwar

protester is willing to spill blood when required.

It is not necessary to be sympathetic with the religious conceptions of David Koresh and his disciples to feel outrage over their fate. When all is said and done, the terrible truth is that 86 people are dead due to the actions of the US government. There was no talk of constitutional rights for the Branch Davidians, none of whom was ever convicted of a criminal offense before they were wiped out to the last man, woman and child.

The actions of the Clinton administration are far more dangerous and its defense of the Waco massacre far more chilling than anything done or said by David Koresh and his band of fundamentalists.

There is one major political lesson that should be drawn from the bloody events of the last week: If this is how the capitalist state proceeds with a small group of religious fanatics of the kind that were openly cultivated during the years of the Reagan and Bush administrations, how much more brutally will it proceed against militant struggles of the working class, which pose a real challenge to the profit system?

It should be pointed out that a much larger police-military bloodbath was only narrowly averted in Los Angeles, where thousands of police and National Guard troops were mobilized last week in anticipation of new riots if the police were acquitted for a second time in the Rodney King beating trial. Janet Reno was actually presented the FBI plan to storm the Branch Davidian compound on April 12, but she delayed taking action on it until after the King jury returned its verdict.

The Waco massacre is an object lesson in the fig-leaf character of American capitalist democracy. Behind the electoral trappings, the essence of the capitalist state is organized violence against all those who are seen to challenge its authority.



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