Cover-up of Waco massacre unravels as new evidence exposes FBI lies

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Attorney General Janet Reno confirmed Friday that she would seek the appointment of an independent investigator to probe charges of an FBI cover-up of the Waco massacre. Reno made the announcement at her weekly press conference, following the uncovering of further evidence that government officials systematically lied about the circumstances surrounding the 1993 FBI assault on the Branch Davidian compound in which nearly 80 people were killed.

A raging fire erupted after a US army tank breached the walls of the compound on the morning of April 19, 1993 and began pumping CS tear gas into the structure. Only a handful of those inside escaped alive. Twenty-four of the victims were children. The bloodbath was the culmination of a two-month siege which began when agents of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms staged a provocative—and ill-planned—raid on the Branch Davidian property outside of the central Texas city, allegedly to serve a warrant on the group's leader, David Koresh, for possession of illegal weapons.

The Waco massacre was a defining moment for the Clinton administration, only three months after Clinton entered the White House. Justice Department officials pressed for a showdown with Koresh and his followers, to assert the authority of the state and to avenge the killing of four BATF agents in the original botched raid (six Davidians were killed in the same gun-battle). As one FBI spokesman declared, before the final confrontation began, "We are going to show them that we control the compound and they are impotent."

Attorney General Reno approved the attack plans and defended the conduct of the FBI attackers in media interviews and appearances before multiple congressional inquiries. An official Justice Department investigation—now revealed to be a whitewash—claimed that the fire which destroyed the Branch Davidian compound was an act of mass suicide, ordered by Koresh.

Last week press accounts revealed that FBI agents fired pyrotechnic tear gas grenades at a storm shelter about 25 yards from the main building several hours before the fire broke out on April 19, 1993. These reports directly contradicted repeated statements by Reno, then FBI Director William Sessions and lower-ranking officials, who all declared that the FBI had used no incendiary weapons in the course of the assault.

Then on Wednesday the FBI released an audiotape and videotape made by a surveillance airplane equipped with an infrared scanner which was flying above the Branch Davidian compound during the final hours of the confrontation. The tapes, covering the period from about 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. on the morning of the attack, record the conversation between one FBI supervisor, Stephen McGavin, to the assistant special agent in charge of the hostage rescue team at Waco, Richard Rogers.

McGavin is heard asking for authorization to use "military rounds" against the storm shelter, after less powerful tear gas grenades failed to penetrate the structure's plywood roof. (Despite its flimsy construction, the structure is regularly referred to in the media as a "bunker," to preserve the impression that the Branch Davidians were a military opponent of the US government, rather than a small religious sect.)

Rogers readily gave his consent, at 7:48 a.m., and two of the more powerful incendiary devices were employed. A few minutes later, according to contemporaneous television coverage, the roof of the storm shelter can be seen in flames. This structure was connected to the main building by a tunnel—which was why the FBI wanted to attack it, to block an escape route.

Nine days later, on April 28, 1993, Rogers sat behind FBI Director Sessions at a congressional committee hearing at which Sessions emphatically declared that the FBI had only used "noninflammable" tear gas and that the grenades used to deliver the gas "will not start or contribute to a fire." Rogers himself testified for two days before the committee without disclosing the use of the military-issue pyrotechnic grenades.

The cover-up included not only denying the use of the grenades, but concealing the existence of the videotapes. On many occasions since 1993 FBI officials have categorically denied that any infrared videotape was taken before 10:42 a.m. on the final day of the Waco siege. In one lawsuit under the Freedom of Information Act, FBI officials told a federal judge under oath that there was no recorded radio traffic during the entire six hours of the final assault. This judge later accused the FBI of "stonewalling."

A number of important questions are raised by the new evidence:

* Could the flames which erupted from the storm shelter have

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spread down the tunnel connecting it to the main wooden structure?

* How many more military-issue pyrotechnic grenades were in the arsenal of the FBI agents during the final assault? Were any more of these used?

* In addition to Rogers and McGavin, how many other FBI officials were aware of the use of pyrotechnic grenades? (The on-site communications were being monitored directly by FBI headquarters in Washington.)

* The tape was supposedly discovered by FBI officials on Saturday, August 28, but Reno and the Justice Department were not notified for four days. Why the delay? Was the tape altered in any way during this time?

* What other tapes and records of the events of April 19, 1993 remain in the FBI's secret files? (At least one such tape has been reported, covering some of the time period after 8 a.m. on the day of the attack on the Branch Davidians.)

* What was the role of the military at Waco? A report by government auditors released this week found that the Department of Defense spent over $1 million in support of the Waco siege, and there have been claims that soldiers in the Army's elite Delta Force participated in the assault.

The new evidence on Waco has brought the long-running conflict between the FBI and the Justice Department to the point of open warfare. Reno declared that she had been lied to by FBI officials about the use of incendiary grenades at Waco. FBI officials denounced her decision to order US Marshals into the FBI headquarters to seize the videotape and a total of four boxes of new Waco material brought there from the offices of the FBI hostage rescue team in Quantico, Virginia.

FBI Director Louis Freeh, appointed by Clinton to succeed William Sessions in the fall of 1993, has established a position of independence, and even opposition, in relation to the White House and the attorney general. When the Republican Party won control of Congress in 1994, Freeh moved to establish close relations with former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and other Republican leaders, distancing himself from his nominal superiors in the executive branch.

This reached the point, in 1997, where Freeh publicly opposed Janet Reno's decision not to appoint a special prosecutor to investigate Democratic Party and White House fundraising in the 1996 election campaign. Freeh supplied documents to congressional Republicans who were seeking to use the campaign finance probe for the purpose later served by the Lewinsky investigation—as a means of destabilizing the Clinton administration. FBI agents assigned to the Office of Independent Counsel played a major role in the Starr investigation, which led to Clinton's impeachment and trial.

The Waco massacre has been seized on for years by extreme right-wing elements, both inside and outside the Republican Party, who have sought to channel legitimate outrage over this and other repressive actions by the federal government in a reactionary direction. This has been assisted by the posture of the Democratic Party and the representatives of what passes for liberalism in the United States, who have embraced the law-and-order demagogy of the Republicans and lined up with the Clinton administration in defending FBI thuggery.

Significantly, none of those in Washington, Republicans or Democrats, who now express outrage over Waco, had any criticism of the conduct of Philadelphia police when they bombed the headquarters of the black religious group MOVE in 1985, killing eleven people, including five children, and destroying an entire city block.

The latest Waco revelations serve to undermine both sides in the factional struggle in official Washington. The Clinton administration faces another round of hostile congressional hearings as well as an outside investigation which may provide further details of the bloody massacre for which Reno and Clinton himself bear the main responsibility.

But the issue is also something of a double-edged sword for the congressional Republicans. House Government Operations Committee Chairman Dan Burton claimed that Reno lied to his committee. But it was the FBI which directly perpetrated the massacre, and FBI officials who wrote the script for Reno's testimony. Further exposure and investigation of Waco threaten to undermine not only FBI Director Freeh, but his Republican allies.

Moreover, the exposure of FBI officials as brazen liars, and the spectacle of federal marshals raiding the J. Edgar Hoover Building as though it were the headquarters of a criminal conspiracy—as it most assuredly is!—have the effect of discrediting the state, and especially its police agencies, among broad layers of the population, and increasing public distrust of the whole big business-controlled political system.

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