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"The Burning: A review of 'A Place Called Waco' by David Thibodeau and Leon Whiteson"

by Roberto Suro ("The Washington Post", October 17, 1999)

It was the end of a long, inglorious day at the FBI, and the voice on the other end of the phone sounded weary. I was talking to a senior FBI executive just hours after Attorney General Janet Reno had dispatched U.S. marshals to the J. Edgar Hoover Building to take custody of newly discovered evidence related to the 1993 Waco incident. The unprecedented step suggested that the nation's premier law enforcement agency might be engaged in a cover-up. Reflecting on the indignity, the FBI veteran said, "David Koresh won."

The FBI's standoff with Koresh lasted only 51 days, but more than six years later, and after repeated investigations, "dark questions" remain, as former Senator John C. Danforth put it when he agreed late last month to take over the latest inquiry. With the passage of time, however, some fundamental perceptions have changed. Hardly anyone is willing to simply take the FBI or Reno at their word about the events of April 19, 1993, when Koresh and 73 of his followers and their children died as federal agents tried to drive them from Mount Carmel, their compound in central Texas. Moreover, Koresh has come to seem much less threatening than when he was the subject of all-out demonization by the FBI and much of the media.

While it is an exaggeration to say that Koresh has "won," it is certainly true that Reno and the FBI do not seem like winners anymore as far as this episode is concerned. Koresh is hardly blameless, but over time the siege of Mount Carmel increasingly seems a cruel and dangerous exercise.

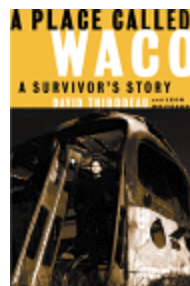
Reading *A Place Called Waco* leaves you with the sickening conclusion that the Branch Davidians' fiery end was a highly foreseeable train wreck. The book is the story of David Thibodeau, one of only nine people who survived the final day at Mount Carmel. With co-author Leon Whiteson, who in the acknowledgments gets credit for "putting it all into written form," Thibodeau offers a compelling and remarkably balanced first-person account of life and death with David Koresh. Most important, the authors provide a crisp narrative of the confrontation between Koresh and law enforcement as seen from within the compound. That perspective reveals a conflict between two ornery parties, both unwilling to back down, neither capable of even trying to understand the other's demands. But these were not two equal parties. Representatives of the federal government stood on one side of the barricades, and they had a responsibility to act judiciously no matter how wackily Koresh behaved. Thibodeau was a follower but no fanatic. We meet him as a struggling drummer fresh out of high school. Koresh, a guitarist who mixed the psalms with hard rock, invites the youngster to join his "Messiah Productions." Thibodeau starts out skeptical, but he tells a highly believable story of gradually, hesitantly accepting Koresh as a spiritual teacher. At Mount Carmel, life in a religious community gives him discipline and companionship. Disappointingly at times, Thibodeau seems naively protective of

Koresh. For example, he acknowledges that Koresh's penchant for sexual relations with girls 14 years old or even younger was illegal and unwisely attracted attention from the authorities, but Thibodeau never confronts the sheer evil of this behavior or explains how he could remain at Mount Carmel after knowing this about his leader. During the initial raid on the compound that left six Davidians and four federal agents dead, Thibodeau is hugging the floor in fear. He says that he never fired a gun during the entire confrontation, a claim backed up by the fact that he was never charged with any crimes. His account benefits as a result because he can claim some objectivity. On the other hand, he was not in Koresh's inner circle, and so he has no direct insights about some of the enduring mysteries of Waco: What was the real size and purpose of the Davidians' arsenal? Did Koresh ever intend to surrender? Who initiated the apparent suicides and mercy killings that left 21 Davidians dead of close-range gunshot wounds within the burning compound?

Much of what has been learned about the events at Waco through various investigations is summarized by Thibodeau and Whiteson in a very accessible and fairly objective form. However, the book is almost agnostic on the origins of the fire that finally consumed Mount Carmel. Thibodeau does not attempt a point-by-point rebuttal of FBI claims that the Davidians set the blaze, nor does he recite the allegations by FBI critics that federal officers directed gunfire at the compound and otherwise took actions directly responsible for the deaths inside. Instead, he concludes that although neither the Davidians nor the FBI deliberately set the compound ablaze, the law-enforcement side knowingly created the conditions for a conflagration.

That captures much of what has changed in the public view over last six years, according to opinion surveys that now show deep skepticism about the FBI's role at Waco. After so many investigations, many Americans have wearily realized there may never be clear findings of intentional wrongdoing. But with the latest revelations of evidence that should have but didn't come to light, there seems to be a growing sense that fault can be found even in ambiguous events. The Danforth investigation need merely support suspicions that government negligence contributed to the death toll at Waco for Reno and the FBI to emerge as the real losers in the long run.

Roberto Suro, a staff writer at The Washington Post, has reported extensively on federal law enforcement.



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