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# Breaking through the myths surrounding the 1993 Branch Davidian raid



*Lee Hancock, Special Contributor*

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Questions and conspiracy theories still shadow the Branch Davidian tragedy. It began unfolding 25 years ago Wednesday with a failed raid by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms on the sect's compound near Waco. Almost 80 people, including 17 children, died by the end of the 1993 siege. To help sort facts from myths, here's key information about what started the standoff:

## Why did ATF target Koresh and the Branch Davidians?

The McLennan County Sheriff's Department asked ATF to investigate possible federal gun violations in May 1992, after a UPS driver reported delivering big shipments of gun parts, ammo, grenade hulls and chemicals and military gear to Koresh and his followers. The

sheriff's department also had reports of explosions and automatic gunfire at Mount Carmel, the sect's property. ATF investigators determined the group was amassing an arsenal, including the means to make illegal weapons. Former followers told ATF before its raid — and at least five surviving Davidians testified afterward — that Koresh taught his followers that he was the Lamb of God and the weapons were for an apocalyptic battle in which they would all be killed; he would be resurrected along with faithful followers to slaughter and judge God's enemies.

## **Didn't ATF invite the news media to the raid?**

Sources outside ATF tipped the *Waco Tribune Herald* and KWTX-TV in Waco about the raid's timing, and their staffers were the only journalists present for the raid. The TV station's tipster was an ambulance dispatcher. Although the newspaper refused to identify its source, its staffer told U.S. Treasury investigators it wasn't an ATF employee. A day before the raid, an ATF agent was told by her boss to get weekend contacts from Dallas TV

stations. She testified that she never revealed when, where or what might happen, and the Dallas stations confirmed that to Texas Rangers. ATF agents sued the newspaper, TV station and ambulance companies, alleging their staff alerted Davidians to the impending raid; although they didn't admit fault, the companies settled for more than \$15 million.

## **Wasn't the raid called "Showtime?"**

Its official name was Operation Trojan Horse. "Showtime" was the radio signal starting the raid, according to the Treasury review, ATF recordings, documents and interviews.

## **Could Koresh have been arrested away from Mount Carmel?**

ATF commanders mistakenly believed that Koresh quit leaving his property long before the raid. The Treasury review found he rode his motorcycle to visit a neighbor and drove his Camaro to a nearby automotive shop during the weeks that ATF undercover agents were assigned to watch Mount Carmel. The review said six people reported seeing Koresh in Waco weeks before the raid. ATF planners said they considered trying to lure Koresh out to arrest him, but they couldn't find a good pretext and feared his followers wouldn't submit without a fight.

[How the 1993 Waco standoff began with a bloody gunbattle that federal agents now regret](#)

## **Couldn't the sheriff have gotten Koresh to surrender?**

After the siege, McLennan County Sheriff Jack Harwell told *The Dallas Morning News*: "I

would have tried to arrest him, and I would've never walked out of there alive. One day there had to be a confrontation with them. They were building for this."



Federal agents prepare to give covering fire to others entering the compound as the raid begins. (KWTX-TV)

## **Who started the shooting on Feb. 28?**

Koresh claimed ATF started the firefight, but agents who got closest to the compound and journalists who were there said the Davidians fired first. KWTX's cameraman, who filmed the gunfight, testified in the 1994 criminal trial that gunfire originated "from inside the compound." In the first live broadcast from the scene, KWTX's reporter said shots came from inside as ATF agents concealed in cattle trailers pulled up to the building and began

jumping out. "They told the people to come out of the house, and those inside the house immediately started firing. And they began to return that fire." Another eyewitness, a *Waco Tribune Herald* reporter, told *The News*, "From what I saw, the Davidians shot first."



A helicopter flies low around the compound area on March 23. Investigations found that no gunfire came from helicopters during the siege. (Erich Schlegel/The Dallas Morning News)

## Did anyone shoot from helicopters?

Texas National Guard pilots who flew three helicopters testified that no shots came from their aircraft. The helicopters were assigned to hover and divert Davidians' attention as the raid began. The aircraft got about 900 feet behind the building when each was hit by Davidian gunfire and forced back. A Texas National Guard after-action report declared: "Nothing but videotape was shot from the TXNG aircraft on 28 February 1993!!!" Koresh insisted the helicopters did fire. His followers repeated his claims, citing bullet holes in the compound roof, as well as the deaths of Peter Gent, who was shot atop the compound water tower as he fired at agents below, and Winston Blake, who was shot in a bedroom. Ballistics studies showed an ATF agent on the ground fired the one bullet that hit Gent. An

autopsy and a later forensic review for the investigation by Special Counsel John Danforth, a former U.S. senator, found Blake's one bullet wound, behind his right ear, was fired at close range from an assault rifle in the compound.

## **What about claims that Davidians had the right to defend themselves?**

After the Davidians' lawyers argued self-defense, a jury rejected murder charges and convicted eight sect members of voluntary manslaughter of ATF agents as well as weapons violations. When the convictions were appealed, the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals observed that citizens have a "duty to accede to lawful government power," such as ATF's lawful execution of their search and arrest warrants. The 5th Circuit's opinion said ATF agents "responded reasonably as the sect unleashed an extraordinary amount of automatic and large caliber gunfire ... upon persons they knew were federal agents." The court concluded Davidian defendants had no legal basis to claim they were defending themselves against excessive force.

[51 days under siege: A timeline of the Branch Davidian standoff](#)

## **How many people did the ATF agents kill in the**

## **initial gunfight?**

ATF agents fatally shot two Davidians. A third and fourth were wounded by ATF agents and finished off with close-range Davidian gunshots, autopsies and evaluations for the Danforth investigation show. A fifth, Koresh's father-in-law, Perry Jones, died from a close-range gunshot to the mouth. Several Davidians testified that Jones was gut shot and screamed in pain. Davidian Kathy Schroeder testified that another Davidian asked Koresh's permission to put Jones out of his misery. Jones' autopsy and the Danforth investigation's forensic review of autopsy photos and reports found only one bullet wound. It was in the mouth.

## **What about the allegation that ATF agents executed Davidian Michael Schroeder as he tried to reach the compound, shooting him in the back of his head?**

A second gunfight broke out as retreating agents ran into Schroeder and two other Davidians headed toward Mount Carmel. Schroeder fired 18 shots from a wooded ravine before his pistol jammed; the second Davidian was captured and the third fled. An autopsy found Schroeder was shot six times — in his front right shoulder and right flank, on his left thigh, one graze on his chest, and near his right temple and ear. A forensic expert working in the Danforth investigation concluded that Schroeder's wounds were consistent with agents' accounts of exchanging gunfire from a distance.

['I don't think it should be forgotten': Branch Davidians remember the Waco raid](#)

## **Were ATF's search and arrest warrants valid?**





David Koresh during a 1988 court appearance with one of the weapons used in a 1987 shootout at the compound between sect members. (AP)

Though criticized by Davidians' supporters, including advocates paid by the National Rifle Association, ATF's probable cause affidavit was approved by a federal magistrate. The warrants' legality was never challenged by the Davidians' defense lawyers.

## **Did the Davidians really have illegal guns?**

The Davidians had illegal machine guns, grenades and silencers.

ATF agents were wounded by automatic gunfire and grenades.

Davidian Donald Bunds recounted how Koresh ordered him to buy a lathe and milling machine; Bunds said he then learned to use them to help convert 90 to 100 assault rifles to automatic

weapons in 1992. Bunds and several other Davidians testified that

Koresh issued every male follower an automatic assault rifle and multiple magazines weeks before the ATF raid. "He was constantly going through a scenario," Bunds said. "[T]he enemies or the cops or the government or the ATF, who were the last people on the list, or some other squad would come down the driveway with rifles, and they're going to have to shoot back." Several women who left during the siege described the group's plans to use grenades in a mass suicide. Another surviving Davidian testified that Koresh distributed grenades the day the compound burned. Houston lawyer Dick DeGuerin, who represented Koresh and met him in the compound during the siege, acknowledged in 1995 congressional hearings that the sect had illegal weapons. At least 48 illegal machine guns were recovered from the burnt compound.



Two children being escorted from the compound. Twenty-one children left the compound during the standoff. At least 17 died. (William Snyder/The Dallas Morning News)

## **What about claims that there wasn't child abuse?**

Texas Child Protective Services investigated but didn't substantiate allegations in 1992. CPS's lead investigator said Koresh limited access to the sect's kids, and her bosses closed the case over her objections. "We didn't have enough information," she told Congress. "We always felt like we weren't getting the full picture, that things were being kept from us." California police investigated reports about Koresh annulling followers' marriages, claiming all Davidian women were his wives and fathering kids with underage girls. After learning of that investigation, California police records indicate, Koresh went back to Waco along with a 14-year-old Australian girl he was suspected of having sex with and soon impregnated. A follower who later left the group told the FBI that was when Koresh

"began to form the idea that law enforcement or government might be the means of his crucifixion."

## **If Koresh did have sex with underage female followers, wasn't that OK if parents gave permission? Doesn't Texas law let 14-year-olds marry?**

Koresh married a 14-year-old with her parents' consent as was allowed by Texas law at the time. For sex with other underage girls, he could've faced state charges ranging from child sexual assault to child injury and endangerment. Adults enabling the abuse could also be prosecuted. In 2011, another polygamist sect leader got life imprisonment in Texas for sexually assaulting 12-year-old and 15-year-old girls he called spiritual brides.

*Longtime Dallas Morning News reporter Lee Hancock covered the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco and its years of repercussions. These questions and answers are based on interviews, court documents, federal records and other research by Hancock. She is now a freelance writer working on a history of the siege and its aftermath.*



Fire engulfs the compound on April 19, 1993, after federal agents inserted tear gas into the building in an attempt to end the 51-day-old standoff and the Branch Davidians responded by setting the blaze. (Susan Weems/The Associated Press)

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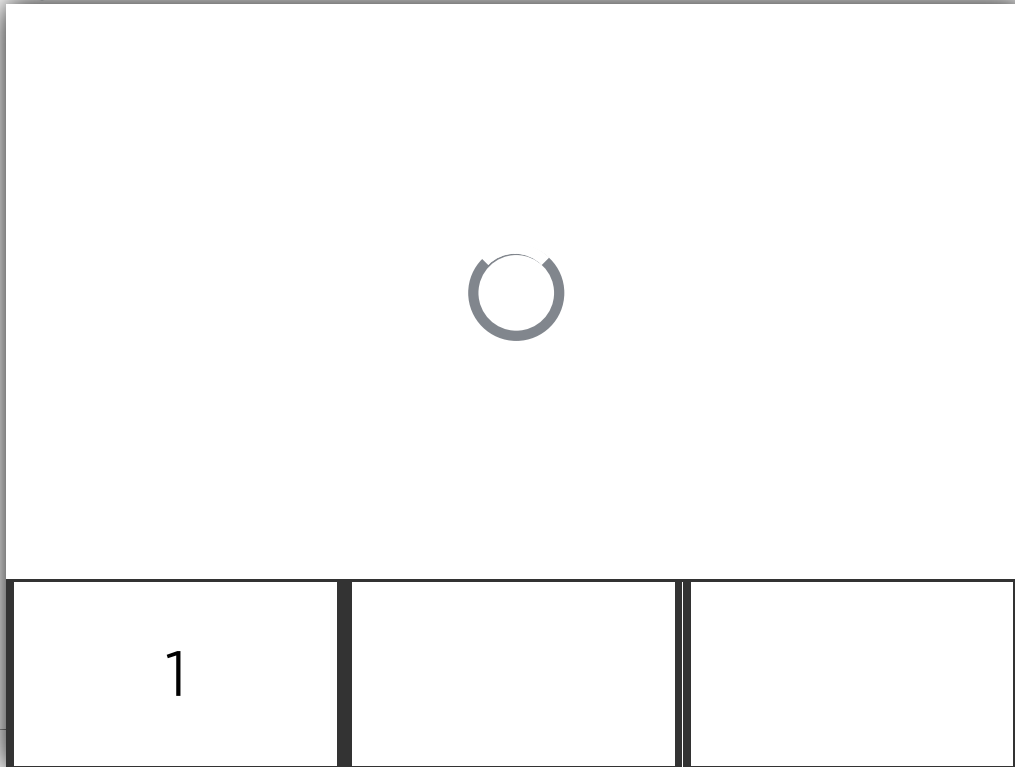
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