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REVELATION AT WACO:
FBI MEETS THE APOCALYPSE

CORE COURSE III ESSAY

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INTRODUCTION:

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) used armored vehicles to pump tear gas into David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas on 19 April 1993; Koresh reacted by igniting a firestorm which consumed 85 lives (including 24 children). An examination of the 51-day stand-off between Koresh and the FBI and its tragic ending using Allison's organizational process and governmental politics models helps explain how decisions were made and why alternate strategies were not employed (Allison, p. 67-96, 144-184).

BACKGROUND:

The Branch Davidians, an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventists, arrived in Waco in 1935. Vernon Wayne Howell, later known as David Koresh, joined the group in 1981 and by 1987 was its leader. Koresh had a gift for oratory and used his tongue, a charismatic leadership ability, and detailed knowledge of the Bible to solidify his hold over the Branch Davidians. He moved the group from a religious sect orientation to an apocalyptic philosophy most outsiders would label a cult (Solotaroff, p. 54-55).

Koresh's Branch Davidians hold what religious scholars refer to as millenarian beliefs. Millenarians believe in the imminence of the second coming of Christ, the battle of Armageddon, their earthly deaths and imminent salvation, and the need for an

authoritative leader to interpret events for them. They also believe they are the chosen ones of God living at the end of times, their leader is the Messiah and can be totally trusted, and their adversaries represent the Devil and cannot be trusted (Reuther p. 20). The book of Revelation and its predictions for the end of the world are particularly important, as is the Lamb of God, chosen to interpret the Seven Seals and thus to explain the end of the world to them. Koresh claimed to be this Lamb of God (Barkun, p. 596-598 and Scruggs, p. 14-17).

One result of such views is an inability to think in terms of normal self-interest, risk versus gain, or in what most outsiders would consider rational decisionmaking (Barkun, p. 596-8). These religious beliefs are important because of their impact on subsequent events. Neither the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) nor the FBI understood the sincerity of these beliefs or their implications. The consequences of the government's failure to understand the implications of Koresh's beliefs will be explored as the siege and its end are analyzed. First, additional background is provided on the initial BATF raid on the compound, which sparked the 51-day standoff.

Jack Harwell, the local sheriff, began the sequence of events in May, 1992 by notifying the BATF that automatic weapons fire had been heard at the Branch Davidian compound. BATF conducted a nine month undercover investigation and determined there were violations of federal gun laws (Rowley, p. 1). A BATF strike force launched a complex raid on the compound designed around the element of

surprise. The raid was inadvertently compromised before it started and in the ensuing gun battle four BATF agents were killed and 16 wounded (six Branch Davidians were killed and an undetermined number wounded, including Koresh) (Seper, p. A-1, A-15 and Hancock, p. A-1). Shortly thereafter the BATF requested that the FBI assume control of the situation.

The BATF raid, not FBI actions, led to the messy situation in which the FBI was thrust. Throughout the stand-off the BATF cooperated closely with the FBI as the latter sought to resolve the situation. There is no evidence of competition between the FBI and the many law enforcement organizations represented at Waco. It was a cooperative effort under the control of the FBI.

STAND-OFF AND FIRESTORM:

The FBI deployed hundreds of agents, including almost all of its special operations personnel and its Behavioral Science Unit (BSU), and entered into negotiations with Koresh which lasted 51 days. Throughout the stand-off the FBI adopted a dual-track approach of negotiating using BSU psychologists while at the same time employing the hostage rescue team, sharpshooters, and other highly trained operations officers in a gradually escalating campaign designed to break Koresh's will, a strategy tailored to a hostage situation, not a stand-off with a cult (Labaton, p. A-1, A-11 and Dennis, p. 39-47). The Justice Department's chronology of events and its analysis of the strategy shows these two approaches were incompatible, with many events occurring in tandem and leading to a negating of negotiating efforts (Scruggs, et al.,

p. 21-113, Davis, p. 5, 43-46, and Dennis, p. 48-53). Throughout this strategy the operations officers were in command, with overall command in the hands of Special Agent-in-Charge (SAC) Jeffrey Jamar. Selection of the local SAC as the on-scene commander was in accordance with standard operating procedure, as was the primacy of operations officers (Scruggs, p. 115).

The dual-track approach can be explained by the organizational structure of the FBI, which separates the BSU from and subordinates it to operations. Although highly respected and successful (and famous, courtesy of the movie "Silence of the Lambs"), the BSU serves the FBI as an investigative tool and functions in an advisory capacity. The recommendations it develops, using highly trained psychologists and other behavioral experts, are written and finalized by experienced agents assigned to the unit and then provided to the on-scene operational commander, who has the authority to accept or reject the recommendations (Doe). In this case SAC Jamar rejected the bulk of the suggestions of BSU psychologists and negotiators, who urged a single-track negotiation strategy, and proceeded with increasing pressure on Koresh throughout the stand-off (Scruggs, p. 118-140).

The individuals assigned to the BSU generally have at least four years of field agent experience in a variety of assignments. They provide psychological assessments on criminals and do not normally see cult-like behavior (Doe). They bring to the job a law enforcement perspective, particularly with respect to cults. That view, which is most prevalent among special operations agents,

is that religious beliefs in general and cults in particular are a convenient cover for criminal activity (Cockburn, p. 414).

BSU agents recognized their lack of experience with cults and attempted to learn about Koresh's beliefs, but from the wrong people. The FBI relied on psychologists and main-line religious scholars rather than religious sect scholars and unbiased cult experts, according to several experts on theology and cults and the Justice Department (Hancock, p. A-1, Goleman, p. A-11, Scruggs et al., p. 190, and Ammeman, p. 2). They also may have relied on deprogrammers and other experts biased against cults (Cockburn, p. 414). As a result, they did not receive appropriate advice. Sympathetic experts would have noted that the vast majority of individuals who commit to such organizations do so voluntarily, are not "brainwashed", cannot be considered hostages, and putting external pressure on them drives them closer to the leader and increases the possibility of mass suicide (Cockburn, p. 414 and Goleman, p. A-11). One quote sums this up: "They acted like they thought they were talking to another bank robber. Instead, they were talking to someone who was dealing in a parallel universe" (Riley, et al., p. 43).

SAC Jamar and FBI operations officers failed to appreciate Koresh's views, believing he was a con man without deeply held religious beliefs who they could "break" via steadily increasing pressure on the compound (Sullivan, p. 12). As officers who had spent their careers in the Criminal Division of the FBI and risen through the ranks by fighting crime and criminals, they naturally

saw Koresh as a criminal. Even the BSU officers, with their extensive psychological training, had conflicting views as to whether Koresh would lead a mass suicide, with some raising the alarm and others discounting it (Dennis, p. 48-53). By mid-March, FBI agents were quoted disparaging Koresh's courage. Koresh had stated he would come out strapped with explosives and blow himself up, but did not; the FBI saw this as "chickening out" (Riley, et al. p. 40). They also denigrated his removing himself from the line of fire during the initial raid, seeing this as cowardice and self preservation (Verhovek, p. A-1, B-13). Based on their background and world view, operations officers focused on these actions rather than the conflicting assessments of the BSU and decided that Koresh would not kill himself and that they were dealing with a hostage situation.

Toward the end of the siege Koresh claimed to be putting the finishing touches on his interpretation of the Seven Seals of the book of Revelation and stated that he would emerge upon its completion. Religious experts suggested to the FBI that this interpretation of the Seven Seals was crucial to Koresh and that he would come out after completing it (Beck et al., p. 27). The chief FBI negotiator on the scene, Clinton Van Zandt, and SAC Jamar both concluded that the manuscript was another stall, that it did not exist, and that Koresh did not intend to come out. Van Zandt is quoted as stating, "We talked with cult experts--and some were bizarre, believe me" (Beck et al., p. 27). [Religious experts who analyzed the manuscript (it did exist), obtained off a computer

disk possessed by one of the few survivors of the inferno, referred to it as a serious exegesis, carefully organized and reasoned. They believe that Koresh would have surrendered once he had finished it (Beck et al., p. 26-28).]

SAC Jamar and Van Zandt believed that the siege could go on indefinitely, that Koresh was negotiating in bad faith, and that they were not going to talk him into surrender because Koresh would never trade command of his flock and the companionship of many wives for a prison cell. Quotes by SAC Jamar during an interview after the fire show his point of view: "The negotiations were going nowhere...We could spend six more months here and nothing would change...Too much talent was being used simply to stand around and guard a place" (Johnson, p. A-20). An anonymous agent provided a more ominous reason for the decision: "These people had thumbed their nose at law enforcement" (Bruning, p. 9). SAC Jamar and his operations officers devised a plan they described publicly then and later as upping the ante--moving in armored vehicles, punching holes in the compound walls, and filling the compound with a non-lethal tear gas. Privately, FBI agents acknowledged the tactic was designed to end the siege by scattering Koresh's flock and flushing everyone into the open, where they would be arrested. People living near the compound stated that FBI agents told them, "It's going to end today" (Cockburn, p. 10).

The operations officers, after 51 days of round-the-clock deployment against a man who murdered four fellow officers and made them look impotent to a world watching courtesy of media

saturation, were tired, angry, and frustrated by their lack of control (Riley et al., p. 43 and McMurtry, p. 18). They saw little progress on the horizon and developed the non-lethal gassing plan on-scene to resolve the matter. They coordinated the plan through FBI headquarters, which approved it and briefed Attorney General Janet Reno, who rejected it as provocative (Johnston, p. A-32). However, the plan had gathered momentum as it went through the coordination process, winning unanimous approval among senior ranks of the FBI and Justice Department. No alternatives were presented to Attorney General Reno, and after listening to several hours of briefings, at which she asked many questions and was repeatedly assured the plan was the only viable course of action, she acceded to the recommendations of SAC Jamar and the senior leadership at FBI and the Justice Department and approved the raid. She informed President Clinton the day before it occurred (Beck et al., p. 30 and Johnston, p. A-32). Attorney General Reno appears to have deferred to the experts working for her. Although she accepted full responsibility for ordering the raid, she has not stated publicly why she did so.

In addition to individual bureaucratic motives, organizational imperatives played a large part in the decision to develop the plan and seek its swift approval. The FBI was consumed by the siege. The entire senior management of the FBI and the Justice Department was engaged every day. All other operations were affected as enormous resources were diverted to Waco. Overtime and travel pay costs severely hurt the FBI's budget. The entire special

operations capability of the FBI was tied down and unavailable should a crisis occur elsewhere. Every day spent at Waco taxed the FBI and diverted it from its many other missions. FBI leadership tasked SAC Jamar to find a non-confrontational way to end the siege (Doe).

Many alternatives were explored. One was to bring in reinforcements and continue to pursue the ongoing strategy. However, reinforcements were not readily available. A review of the Posse Comitatus statute and discussions with a senior military police officer indicate the military and National Guard could not have been brought in. It is against US law for the military to conduct a siege on US soil or to conduct a raid to arrest a suspect (Webb). Almost all of the FBI's special operations agents already were engaged and offices throughout the country had been tapped for manpower, making relief or reinforcement difficult. The BATF had remained on the scene in force after 28 February and other arms of federal, state, and local law enforcement also were represented. There were few additional law enforcement assets available. Besides, SAC Jamar felt the strategy was going nowhere.

Other alternatives also were studied. It was deemed illegal, immoral, and unwise to assassinate Koresh, for to do so risked raising a storm of media and public condemnation and making it difficult to conduct future negotiations in similar circumstances. Another raid was ruled out because of the likelihood of casualties on both sides and the number of women and children present. The FBI decided that time was not on its side and waiting out Koresh

was not a viable option. As options were considered and rejected the non-lethal gassing plan gained momentum.

A better strategy would have been to announce a partial stand down, draw back tactical officers and reduce their numbers to the minimum necessary to ensure nobody escaped, downplay the situation to the media (stop talking about it), and step up negotiations using a team of cult experts. This strategy would make time work for the government rather than against it, ease the pressure on Koresh and invalidate his apocalyptic views to his flock, and allow intensive negotiations conducted by people from his universe time to work on Koresh. Ironically, at the time the FBI was deciding it had to move, Koresh apparently was deciding to resume serious negotiations because he was making progress on his exegesis and his renown defense lawyer, Dick DeGuerin, had informed him that the government's case against him was very weak (Riley et al., p. 35).

Unfortunately, this strategy goes against all bureaucratic and organizational instincts of law enforcement, and was not seriously considered. To stand down and do nothing would make them appear impotent and unmanly, would not justify the expenditure of significant resources on special operations forces (and may have resulted in questions regarding their utility and the size of their budgets), and would leave valuable and highly trained resources unused. The purpose of having expensive, highly trained operational units is for them to act and to resolve the situation, particularly when they are already deployed. The operators were in charge, were tired of negotiating, wanted to employ the forces

available to resolve the situation, and were under pressure from headquarters to finish the job. Another critical factor was the desire to bring to justice those responsible for killing fellow agents. This last point was a defining issue for the FBI. It was not dealing with someone with the potential for violence who had not yet acted (had this been the case they probably would have waited indefinitely), but with an individual who had killed and who clearly had the potential to kill again. Since violence had been committed, particularly against fellow agents, it would have been very difficult to turn away (Doe).

CONCLUSION:

The operational background of the individual decisionmakers at Waco, the power they were given to drive events, and the organizational culture of law enforcement to which they belonged led the FBI in one direction. At the same time David Koresh and his flock were moving in an entirely different and misunderstood direction. As a result, the only possible path to a peaceful resolution to the stand-off, drawing down and entering prolonged negotiations using appropriate cult experts, was closed. This made the tragedy at Waco inevitable.

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