

“GOD HELP US, WE ARE THE PRESS!”:
PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN CONFLICT

By

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ABSTRACT

“GOD HELP US, WE ARE THE PRESS!”: PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN CONFLICT

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Public perception of the 1993 Branch Davidian conflict, particularly as it developed well after the event, helped to alter government policy toward New Religious Movements. Prior to the investigations following the conflict, public expectations of government involvement in New Religious Movements had been shaped most dramatically by the mass suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978. That event had convinced scholars and the public at large that New Religious movements had a propensity for violence, and government intervention was necessary on occasion. Thus following Jonestown, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) became involved in several standoffs with New Religious Movements, including the Branch Davidians. After the events in Waco, however, the public argued that violence was not helpful in ceasing New Religious Movements. Policy-makers agreed, and both ATF and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) ceased such interventions.

This study of public perception represents a new area of inquiry by historians. When studying New Religious Movements in the past, historians have examined the

leadership and theology of the movements themselves as well as government actors, and the reasons behind official intervention. They have not yet looked at the changes in public perception of New Religious Movements. As this study suggests, however, public perception is important, because the public's feelings are closely linked to the government's feelings toward New Religious Movements and help to shape the decisions that government officials make when deciding that New Religious Movements have gone too far.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On March 9, 1993, David Koresh, leader of the New Religious Movement the Branch Davidians, hung a sheet from the window that said “God help us, we want the press!” Vicki Mabrey, a news correspondent for ABC during the siege explained that journalists, equally frustrated, jokingly replied to the sign saying “God help us, we *are* the press!”¹ Waco reporter John McLemore explained that as he saw the siege progress, he thought “this must be Budapest, this must be Bosnia, this doesn’t happen in America, no matter what this man did, nobody thought they deserved *that*.² Throughout the 51-day standoff, journalists sought to overcome government instructions that left them stationed miles away from the compound, “doubling and tripling lenses” trying to zoom in as close as they could.³ Journalists’ distant view of the Branch Davidian conflict as well as their personal opinions did much to shape popular opinion of the Waco siege and impact subsequent public perception of New Religious Movements.

Much of the coverage provided on the Branch Davidians described them as “cult members,” a term which already carried a stigma. The term *cult*, prior to the standoff had been associated with psychologically-unstable memberships and attributed to religions with taboo practices that were originally thought to be outgrowths of the counterculture. Early sociological studies on these New Religious Movements that center on the study of “cults” appear to believe that these Movements attracted younger adults because they provided a greater sense of fulfillment than mainstream religions. Political scientist

¹ Lesley Stahl, *What Happened at Waco?* VHS (CBS News Productions, Films for the Humanities and Sciences 1997).

² Stahl, *What Happened at Waco?*

³ Ibid.

Edward Levine explained that, “cults made their appearance almost imperceptibly at the end of the 1960’s.”⁴ When describing cults and what separated them from mainstream religion, he explained that “cults are alike in that they provide their converts with four incentives of central importance to them: a charismatic authoritative leader with whom to identify; a religious doctrine that purports to be able to resolve the problems of the world and those of their members; stringent, ascetic regulations governing their daily lives; and close, ongoing personalized relationships with others like themselves.”⁵ Sociologists

Edward Levine also claimed the target audience to be college students, because “college students and young adults have such basic dependency needs...lack of a firm sense of self-worth and...inability to be self-reliant. Troubled by domineering impulses and other psychopathological problems, these young people cannot fend for themselves.”⁶ These reasons lead Levine to believe that young people are “easy prey for the authoritarian personalities of cult leaders and of those who rise to positions of power in cults.”⁷

Levine wrote in the shadow of one of the most tragic and unprecedented of New Religious events, the mass suicide at Jonestown. Concentrating on the ways in which Jonestown shaped scholarly and public options about cults is essential background to understanding the response to the Branch Davidian conflict. Following the 1978 mass suicide among Jim Jones’ followers at Jonestown, Guyana, sociologists and the general public alike wanted to know what motivated people to join these movements.

Sociologists hoped to determine what distinguished those who joined these movements from those who did not, but their claims about these differences, while plausible to them

⁴ Edward Levine, “Religious Cults: Their Implications for Society and the Democratic Process,” *Political Psychology*: 3, no. 3-4 (Fall 1981): 4.

⁵ Levine, “Religious Cults.”

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Levine, “Religious Cults.”

during this time, proved unsubstantiated in later studies on individuals who join New Religious Movements. One study examines “weakening of conventional family values” as a reason why individuals joined cults.⁸ The study ultimately finds that family experiences did not, on the whole, shape why individuals entered cults. They found that “there is some evidence that the formation of a healthy and harmonious family bond during the critical years of adolescence and young adulthood, while not explaining affiliation, does help to explain why young people may eventually defect from a cult.”⁹ They showed that, while they may have added to the reasons why young people disaffiliated, weak families were not the reason why some chose to join New Religious Movements.

Further evidence of both rampant interest in this topic but inconclusive research comes in the work of sociologist Eileen Barker. Barker explains that after Jonestown, “the horror of Jonestown was compounded by its apparent incomprehensibility” with people now asking “how, it was repeatedly asked, was it possible for adult men and women, at least some of whom were reasonably well educated, to agree to take their own lives at the behest of a man who, in the eyes of most people, was surely nothing but a raving lunatic? And could it happen again?”¹⁰ Barker states that most people at this time believed that it “must have been some kind of mind control,” and as a result, the practice of “deprogramming” defined as “forcibly kidnapping members of the movements and

⁸ Stuart Wright and Elizabeth S. Piper, “Families and Cults: Familial Factors Related to Youth Leaving or Remaining in Deviant Religious Groups,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 48, no. 1 (1986): 20.

⁹ Stuart Wright and Elizabeth S. Piper, “Families and Cults.”

¹⁰ Eileen Barker, “Religious Movements: Cult and Anticult Since Jonestown,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 12, (1986): 331.

holding them against their will until they renounced their faith,” had been introduced in the early 1970’s, and support for it augmented after Jonestown.¹¹

The “brainwashing theory” surfaced in early studies of New Religious Movements, with other sociologists and psychologists forming related theories. Richard Barrett Ulman and D. Wilfred Abse, political psychologists, argued that the members of a New Religious Movement were under “mass hypnosis” where they “blindly follow the orders of the charismatic leader as in a daydream or trance.”¹² When discussing Jonestown, they explained, “the more or less successful displacement of group anger and narcissistic rage …may also readily lead to group paranoia. The group comes to imagine that the objects of displaced anger and rage seek retaliation and revenge, at the least, provocations from outside become grossly exaggerated; at the most, mutual provocation becomes escalated with real danger resulting from paranoid groups on a collision course.”¹³ Ulman and Abse explained that the group went along with the mass suicide as a result of mass paranoia that they felt due to the indoctrination of Jones. They also explained that Jones used “fear tactics,” and that “he warned black temple members that they were going to be herded into concentration camps. He convinced white members that they were under CIA investigation and would be tracked down, tortured, imprisoned and killed if they did not go along with his dictates.”¹⁴ The fear tactics, along with the indoctrination conducted by, led to the loyal devotion of his followers. Both scholars also explained that he used illegal drugs to control the behavior of the members of the

¹¹ Eileen Barker, “Religious Movements: Cult and Anticult Since Jonestown,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 12, (1986): 331.

¹² Richard Ulman and D. Wilfred Abse, “The Group Psychology of Mass Madness: Jonestown,” *Political Psychology*: 4, no. 4, (1983): 641.

¹³ Richard Ulman and D. Wilfred Abse, “The Group Psychology of Mass Madness,” 646.

¹⁴ Ibid, 653.

People's Temple, and that he tried to create an environment through which mass suicide would ultimately be expected by practicing for mass suicide on "white-nights."¹⁵

Ultimately, Jonestown changed the views of scholars on New Religious Movements. The mass suicide showed that these New Religious Movements had a propensity for violence, and it also created a stereotype for New Religious Movements with a charismatic leader at the forefront and brought meaning to the word "cult." Elaine Barker explains that "while the movements had previously been treated individually (the Unification Church was mentioned most frequently), after Jonestown, they tended to all be lumped together under the now highly derogatory label 'cult'. Despite pleas from the movements themselves... all the new religious were contaminated by association."¹⁶ Jonestown had also brought the label "cult" into the public sphere. No longer a component of the counterculture, cults were seen as threatening and possibly dangerous.

While scholars delved anew into the dangers of cults, press coverage often had a different concern. The press as well as the public questioned why the federal government had not intervened earlier. Much of the press following the mass suicide accused the government of being knowingly aware of the compound and worse, collaborating with the Guyanese government to keep the press away from Jonestown.¹⁷ As a defense, the United States consular officials claimed they were "acutely aware that they had no authority to interfere with an American religious establishment, no matter how

¹⁵ Richard Ulman and D. Wilfred Abse, "The Group Psychology of Mass Madness: Jonestown." *Political Psychology*: 4, no. 4, (1983): 653.

¹⁶ Eileen Barker, "Religious Movements: Cult and Anticult Since Jonestown," *Annual Review of Sociology* 12, (1986): 322.

¹⁷ Graham Hovey, "U.S. Explains Policy Toward Sect: Why State Department Knew Little About Colony," *New York Times*. November 27, 1978: A1.

unorthodox its behavior might be.”¹⁸ The public additionally balked at the fact that the government failed to react to information provided to them that “Jim Jones had organized a ‘hit squad’ to assassinate the group’s opponents” which included many political leaders.¹⁹ Post-Jonestown accounts indicate a shift in public policy. While the investigation revealed that prior to the event, the government did not intervene, Jonestown made it evident that the public felt that when followers were engaging in taboo activities that could be dangerous, investigation was necessary. Such a call for intervention was new; sociologists Anson D. Shupe, Jr. and David G. Bromley, explained that earlier when parents tried to levy “charges of kidnapping or enslavement” against New Religious Movements, the allegations became “difficult to sustain when the alleged ‘victims’ reaffirmed their voluntary participation in their faiths.”²⁰ Following Jonestown, the government also viewed New Religious Movements as dangerous, and the tenor of those investigations suggests that public wanted the federal government involvement when New Religious Movements presented a danger to others, including their followers.

That shift in perspective was also clear in the events following Jonestown, when the federal government began to involve themselves further in affairs where Church and state collided, and where these New Religious Movements could present harm to others. The government assumed this responsibility especially when dealing with those who were part of New Religious Movements. Randy Weaver, a resident of Boundary County, Idaho who loosely affiliated with the Christian Identity movement became the

¹⁸ Graham Hovey, “U.S. Explains Policy Toward Sect: Why State Department Knew Little About Colony,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1978: A13.

¹⁹ Nicholas Horrock, “Jonestown Inquiry Faults U.S. Embassy: House Panel Report Finds,” *New York Times*, May 16, 1979: A21.

²⁰ Anson Shupe and David G. Bromley, “The Moonies and the Anti-Cultists: Movement and Countermovement in Conflict.” *Sociological Analysis*, (Winter 1979): 330.

government's next preoccupation. The Christian Identity movement is a white supremacist movement that incorporates Christian theology with white supremacy. While Weaver agreed with some parts of their theology, he did not attend organized meetings or follow Christian Identity religious leaders. Though later articles, movies and documentaries by the press rehabilitated Randy Weaver, throughout the Ruby Ridge standoff, his assumed affiliation with the Aryan Nations and white supremacy in general coupled with the media's report of his stockpiling of guns and his religious zealotry failed to attain sympathy from the general public. During the standoff, the *Boston Herald* as well as other newspapers distanced the public from Weaver's supporters, calling them, "a strange mix" that included "Nazi skinheads, local residents and ultra-Christian fundamentalists."²¹ Indeed the only group who argued against this intervention were marginalized groups. Ruby Ridge, instead, subsequently became a rallying call for white supremacists and only a minority of individuals felt that the United States government acted irresponsibly.

By 1993 then, scholarly research and press coverage had created a specific context, which was both pro-government and anti—"cult." The Branch Davidian conflict, unlike Ruby Ridge, Jonestown or past altercations, began with the possibility of it as "another Jonestown" clearly in sight by the media and the authorities alike. From the day that coverage began, the Branch Davidians were described as a cult. Scholars since the conflict have argued that the use of the word cult may have aroused a lack of sympathy from the public because of past associations. Catherine Wessinger, a scholar of religion, argues that the term "cult" dehumanizes the religion's members and that "it strongly implies that these people are deviants; they are seen as crazy, brainwashed, (and) duped

²¹ Ralph Ranalli, "Gritz takes center stage in standoff," *Boston Herald*. August 31, 1993: 12.

by their leader.”²² With the Branch Davidians being described using the same label as groups such as Jonestown, comparisons appeared to be inevitable. Historian Todd Kerstetter, however, downplays the rhetoric associated with the word “cult” and instead felt that what made the Branch Davidian conflict occur was that the Branch Davidians had broken away from what had been considered acceptable religious practices. He argued the “West had limits when it came to religious freedom. American society still did not tolerate barbarians in the garden.”²³ By studying the Ghost Dancers and Mormons, he shows that the West also had a tradition of uneasiness toward religions with taboo religious practices. Religious historian Eugene V. Gallagher agrees with Kerstetter, arguing that the conclusion of the Branch Davidian conflict pertained less to the rhetoric surrounding it and more toward American historical tradition. He explains, “There is a recurrent sequence in American history in which sectarian (and sometimes rather authoritarian) religions emerge and elicit tremendous hostility.” He describes this perceived threat to the public as a “subversion myth” where a movement, whatever its religious intentions, “is thought to pose a threat to the civil order.”²⁴ He explains that, “sometimes these movements are seen as mainly religious fronts for political subversive movements, or as movements that will endanger the civil authority.”²⁵

In the years after the Branch Davidian conflict, scholars have shifted their focus when studying New Religious Movements. No longer centering their research on the possible character flaws of those joining these New Religious Movements, they instead

²² Paul Olson, “The Public Perception of “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45 No. 1, (2006): 97.

²³ Todd Kerstetter, *God’s Country, Uncle Sam’s Land*, (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 125.

²⁴ Eugene Gallagher, “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” *History of Religions*. 47, No. 2/3, (2007): 205.

²⁵ Eugene, Gallagher “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” 205.

tried to focus on the theology and the motivations behind some of the actions that occurred during events such as the Jonestown mass suicide and the Branch Davidian Conflict. Rebecca Moore's book, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples' Temple* aims to explain Peoples' Temple and within the context of religion in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's and how it coincided with African American churches at the time. John R. Hall took a different approach. He aimed to situate fundamentalist groups such as People's Temple within the context of American Religious Fundamentalism. Hall argues that the fundamentalist climate of the United States at the time brought about many movements that were out of the ordinary, such as People's Temple.²⁶ Historian Kenneth C.G. Newport studied Branch Davidian theology in depth, as well as its fundamentalist origins and finds that the Branch Davidians, had a "theological rationale" for mass suicide. Newport's examination of government documents detailing interactions between David Koresh and negotiators reveal "unassailable evidence" that the government had not known prior to the siege that the Branch Davidians would try to kill themselves. For Newport, such evidence negated any conspiracy theories blaming the government for the fire, instead surmising that the Branch Davidians had started it.²⁷

Earlier conflicts, especially following Jonestown, suggest public perception was key in the interpretation of those events. For example, after 1978, historian Judith McCormick explained that because most of the research on Jonestown by the press had been done following the suicides, Jim Jones and the Peoples' Temple were painted in a

²⁶ John R. Hall, "Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History."

²⁷ Stuart Wright, "Revisiting the Branch Davidian Mass Suicide Debate," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 2 (November 2009): 4.

partially unsubstantiated negative light.²⁸ Her publications highlight the impact of this public opinion, showing that even their traditional religious practices were often described as “eerie” or “sinister” as if the press tried to show the malicious intentions of Jones that were latent early on.²⁹ Catherine Wessinger has studied the effects of the events of Jonestown on public perception of religion as a whole. She argues that, “Jonestown is more than a place in Guyana where an American religious group lived and died. Jonestown has come to symbolize the worst possible outcome of religious commitment.”³⁰

While Jonestown encouraged more research on New Religious Movements in general, the emphasis on their theology rather than on the character flaws of the leader or the individuals that join them became the legacy for scholars following the Branch Davidian conflict. Rather than dismissing them as “cults,” the conflict brought about an effort to understand their theology to avert such tragedies as the mass suicide at Jonestown and the Branch Davidian conflict. The Branch Davidian conflict became the watershed moment in which theology became examined further, rather than just the motivations of an egotistical leader or the character flaws of the individuals who joined these movements.

The reason behind this shift toward taking the theology of New Religious Movements lies in the connection between events in Waco and public opinion. The remainder of this study seeks to document shifts in public opinion and suggest how that public opinion may have had an impact on public policy. Following the Branch Davidian

²⁸ Judith Wrightman, “Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides: A Sociological History of Peoples Temple.” *Studies in Religion and Society* 7 (1983): 166.

²⁹ Judith Wrightman, “Making Sense of the Jonestown Suicides,” 168.

³⁰ Maaga, Mary McCormick. *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998): xix.

conflict, the federal government and ATF largely backed out of raids on New Religious Movements, preferring instead to leave it to state or local authorities to resolve the issues. Why that would be so has everything to do with the new context created by shifting public opinion on New Religious Movements, government responsibility and the nexus between the two.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Gaining a full picture of public opinion requires studying public response in a number of areas, all with their inherent biases. For my thesis, I have chosen to study the response of the general public using editorials, letters to the editor and opinion polls. To understand the views of the media, I have elected to study newspapers and television news coverage as well as portrayals of New Religious Movements in popular media. While they do provide insight into the feelings of individuals that lived during the conflict, each has biases associated with them.

When Habermas and others polled editors about the importance of letters to the editor, 99 percent of editors stated that the letters to the editor were a place for exchange information and opinion, 52 percent of editors said that letters to the editor were some of the more frequently read items on the editorial page.³¹

The demographics of letters to the editor, according to a study by Christopher Cooper and others indicates that the average age of a letter-writer is 55, with a standard deviation of 15, which Cooper cites as, “consistent with political science literature concluding that older people are more likely to participate in politics.”³² According to Cooper, 95 percent of those who write letters to the editor are Caucasian, which also is a limiting demographic, as this does not accurately reflect the number of minorities in the

³¹ Jurgen Habermas, “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,” (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

³² Christopher Cooper, H. Gibbs Knotts and Moshe Haspel, “The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 42, No. 1 (2009): 131.

United States.³³ Nevertheless, I contend that the study of Letters to the Editor, despite limiting demographics, is useful because of the different insight that it offers compared to other forms of media. A study conducted by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1993, explains that many individuals “suppress views with which they expect others in a discussion to agree, for fear of ostracism or reprisal.”³⁴ Therefore, Neumann states, “letters are less constrained by group norms than face-to-face conversation would be.”³⁵ Neumann’s analysis explains the partisan nature of many of these letters. The data that I received from letters to the editor, while mostly partisan, portray opinions of the general public that they would not otherwise express to pollsters or even others in conversation. As a result, it shows what some of the public may be thinking but not saying in polls, scholarship and newspaper articles.

Polls offer a different set of data, but their demographics are more varied. Public opinion scholar Seymour Sudman explains that, “all the polls use some variant of telephone random digit dialing...exchanges are selected with probability based on listed household numbers.”³⁶ All of the polls select one person per household, and many make sure the quota is even between men and women. Other polls, such as those by CBS also place quotas according to gender, region, age, education and other demographics. The varied demographics enable us to view the opinion of the majority of the public.³⁷

³³ Christopher Cooper, H. Gibbs Knotts and Moshe Haspel, “The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them,” 131.

³⁴ Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, “The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin,” 2d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁵ Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, “The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin.”

³⁶ Seymour Sudman, “The Network Polls: A Critical Review,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 47, No. 4: 490.

³⁷ Seymour Sudman, “The Network Polls: A Critical Review.”

Newspaper article and documentaries are methods through which the press and individuals more educated on a topic convey their information to the public. Public opinion scholars such as Adam Berinsky suggest that, “visual electronic media [is the most] dominant tool” that shapes public opinion. Anthony Downs also explains the public’s propensity to “seek assistance from men who are experts in those fields, have the same political goals he does, and have good judgment,” because the “average citizen cannot be expert in all the fields of policy that are relevant to his decision” about a particular current event.³⁸ Martin Gilens, however, state that public opinions are also, “more frequently matters of sentiment and disposition rather than ‘reasoned preferences’.”³⁹ While it is important to understand what newspapers are saying, in order to gain a fuller perspective of what the public was feeling at the time, it is important to study opinion polls as well.

For this particular study, I have looked at a combined 2,800 articles and Letters to the Editor from all over the United States. In order to make sure that my study did not depict solely regional opinion, I made sure to look at as many articles as possible. In my study of opinion polls, popular media interpretations, newspaper articles and letters to the editor, I aim to show a diverse set of data in order to demonstrate the public’s reaction to the Branch Davidian conflict and its relation to press portrayal of other New Religious Movements.

³⁸ Adam Berinsky, *New Directions in Public Opinion*, (New York, Routledge, 2011): 52.

³⁹ Adam Berinsky, *New Directions in Public Opinion*, (New York, Routledge, 2011): 168.

CHAPTER THREE

PUBLIC PERCEPTION DURING THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN CONFLICT

The precedent laid by the mass suicide at Jonestown, as well as prior religious fundamentalists and apocalyptic sects who had stockpiled guns, showed what could possibly happen when a fundamentalist group encountered resistance to their plans. Prior to the mass suicide, the prominent examples were all groups that remained insulated.⁴⁰ The Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints church, Moonies (followers of Sun Myung Moon, also known as the Unification Church), Hare Krishnas and prior religious movements classified as “cults” had never been thought to be violent. Most sociologists and theologians thought cults to be psychologically dangerous, but prior to Jonestown, not physically so. By 1993, however, the Jonestown suicide weighed heavy on onlookers’ minds, in both the media and general public. That perspective colored early interpretations of Koresh’s standoff with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF).

On February 28th, while trying to serve search warrants to the Branch Davidians, federal ATF agents met gunfire as the Branch Davidians shot at them for forty-five minutes until surviving agents negotiated a cease-fire with them. While the federal officials had hoped to catch the Branch Davidians off-guard, after Sunday services, they were clearly unsuccessful. In later interview ATF agents noted that the “surprise factor” had been lost and had differing opinions as to why it happened. The special agent in charge of ATF’s Dallas office, Ted Royster, explained that, “it [appeared] they knew we were coming...we had our plan down. We had our diversion down, all of which went into

⁴⁰ The Mass Suicide at Jonestown was an episode which also involved the killings of Congressman Leo Ryan and 4 others who had gone to Jonestown, Guyana to investigate Jones’ settlement there

effect. They were waiting.”⁴¹ Jack Killorin, a Washington spokesman for the ATF, shared that they, “learned through [their] contact inside the compound that a phone call from the outside warned them we were on the way just at the most critical moment in the raid.”⁴² Many articles called it the, “bloodiest day in the 21-year history of the ATF” and speculated on how the “element of surprise” may have been lost.⁴³

In the opening days of the stand-off, journalists speculated about whether civilians or agents fired first, but most often investigated the sect and its history, drawing conclusions from information gained about the sect and explanations provided by various scholars and theologians. From the beginning of the standoff, journalists and scholars alike compared the Branch Davidians to many other fundamentalist groups, but none more than Jonestown. Indeed, the morning of the ATF planned raid, a long expository article about David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, written in the *Waco Tribune Herald* prior to the shooting, stated that, “an Australian private detective, Geoffrey Hossack, who has investigated the cult, compares Mount Carmel to Jonestown, Guyana.”⁴⁴ The article also goes on to say that, “there is fear that Mr. Howell [David Koresh’s given name] may be sitting on a religious powderkeg.”⁴⁵

The earliest articles written about David Koresh already expressed negative opinions about him, his upbringing and his followers. The same February *Waco Tribune Herald* article described David Koresh as a wildcard: “He has dimples, claims a ninth-grade education, married his legal wife when she was 14, enjoys a beer now and then,

⁴¹ J Michael Kennedy, “Officers Ambushed at Sect’s Camp,” *The Charlotte Observer*. March 1, 1993: 1A.

⁴² J. Michael Kennedy, “Officers Ambushed at Sect’s Camp,” 1A.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Mark England and Darlene McCormick, “Cult with an arsenal triggers fears in Texas,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, February 28, 1993: A1

⁴⁵ Mark England and Darlene McCormick, “Cult with an arsenal triggers fears in Texas,” A1.

plays a mean guitar, reportedly packs a 9mm weapon, and keeps an arsenal of military assault rifles, and willingly admits that he is a sinner without equal.”⁴⁶ Many articles to follow would paint a similar picture of a gun-toting, amateur musician who thought he was Jesus Christ. A *USA Today* article explained that David Koresh had become known as the “Wacko from Waco,” and described him as a “failed rock ‘n’ roller who says he is the son of God.”⁴⁷ While most articles described Koresh unfavorably, many of the articles concentrated on the Branch Davidians as well, using many of the same theories developed in earlier New Religious Movement scholarship to explain their decision to follow such a leader.

From the beginning of investigations into the February 1993 standoff, the Branch Davidians had been described as a “cult” and as the reporters interviewed scholars, that word brought a negative connotation. A writer for the *St. Petersburg Times* noted that, “many cults were formed by leaders with a lust for power, a willingness to cross the bounds of ethical and moral behavior to satisfy that lust, and a knowledge of how to use influence techniques...to control others in a bid to satisfy that lust.”⁴⁸ One of the main characteristics discussed by newspapers about “cults,” was the presence of a charismatic leader, but most descriptions included much more than that and were not all the same. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* looked to the “dictionary of Bible and Religion” which stated that, “the word “cult” can be applied to groups that have the following characteristics: preaches that a literal end-of-the-world is imminent, attacks established

⁴⁶ Mark England and Darlene McCormick, “Cult with an arsenal triggers fears in Texas,” *Waco Tribune-Herald*, February 28, 1993: A1

⁴⁷ Mark Potok and Robert Davis, “A Tense Waco awaits outcome of sect’s standoff,” *USA Today*, March 9, 1993: 3A.

⁴⁸ Cynthia Kissner, “Nation needs to address cults’ ever-present evils,” *St. Petersburg Times*, March 13, 1993: 6E

churches for false teachings, relentlessly engages in pursuit of new members, demands full commitment from members, including donating or sharing personal possessions [and] is shaped by an absolute leader whose word is regarded as gospel and who may claim to be divine.”⁴⁹ The article went on to quote a minister who said that a bad sign is a leader who claims that he is the only one who can interpret scripture and does not tolerate other religious views.

While some newspapers went to theologians for opinions, others approached scholars. This group also created a negative view by explaining the recruitment of followers in a “cult.” They noted that timing mattered as well as the leader’s charisma, when drafting new members. Rick Slavings, a professor of sociology at Radford University, explained that, “members are recruited when they are suffering, when they are facing ‘social deficits’ – a lack of something in their lives.”⁵⁰ While the members of the cult may not be susceptible normally, Slavings explained, a traumatic or difficult event in their lives could have been what drove these individuals to join a cult. He explained that, “the recruiters tell the prospects we love you, we’ll take care of you. It can be a powerful attraction.”⁵¹ Stephen Arterburn, the co-author of, *Toxic Faith: Understanding and Overcoming Religious Addiction*, made the argument that the ATF’s attack on the Branch Davidians could strengthen the New Religious Movement and

⁴⁹ Religious News Service, “Intolerance, Fanaticism Mark Cults,” *San Diego Union-Tribune*, March 13, 1993: B8.

⁵⁰ Cody Lowe, “Professor: Cults make all the right promises to prospects.” *The Roanoke Times*, March 28, 1993: B1.

⁵¹ Cody Lowe, “Professor: Cults make all the right promises to prospects.” *The Roanoke Times*, March 28, 1993: B1.

worried about how it might progress. He said, “It’s an us vs. them mentality. This kind of leader seems to need persecution. They feed on it.”⁵²

Like the other scholars, Arterburn explains, “Most all-powerful leaders or ‘prophets’ claim special insights and proclaim their own interpretations of scriptures. This leads to a unique brand of authority over doctrines, beliefs and worship,” and that “often, leaders will also attempt to manipulate members’ marriages and private lives.”⁵³ He argued that there were more to the reasons people join these religious movements than just the influence of a charismatic leader. Explaining that it “may help people avoid facing their day-to-day problems.”⁵⁴ Another expert commented that, “in order to sell anything, all you have to do is find someone who wants to buy what you are selling...in the case of people like Koresh, the product is spiritual and emotional protection from a hostile universe.”⁵⁵ He described those who participated in these cults as “trapped in the helplessness of childhood,” and “too emotionally crippled to function as adults.”⁵⁶ The people that Jim Jones and David Koresh targeted were looking for guidance in all areas of their lives. The consensus by scholars interviewed nationwide was that those who involved themselves in cults either had a traumatic or difficult time in their lives, or they had a character flaw that made them vulnerable to a charismatic leader. Such a dysfunctional view of those holed up in the Branch Davidian compound certainly affected the way the public viewed the government’s interactions with them.

⁵² Terry Mattingly, “Here are 5 Warning Signs of Abusive Religious Group,” *Rocky Mountain News (CO)*, March 13, 1993: 95.

⁵³ Terry Mattingly, “Here are 5 Warning Signs of Abusive Religious Group,” 95.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ David Hunter, “Charismatic or Manipulative?: Cult Leaders often Feed on Human Misery,” *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, March 17, 1993: A19.

⁵⁶ Hunter, David, “Charismatic or Manipulative?: Cult Leaders often Feed on Human Misery,” A19.

Many scholars also attributed Koresh's influence over the Branch Davidian converts to a rise in fundamentalism. They believed that the fundamentalist drive to incorporate aspects of New Testament theology likely influenced David Koresh as well as those who chose to follow him. Theologian Martin Marty explained that, "in much of the world, [fundamentalists] are going to be the biggest force around for some time to come."⁵⁷ He also observed fundamentalists as sharing similar characteristics, "they fight back against the perceived corruption of the modern world; they use Scripture selectively to make their arguments; and they seek to restore conservative values from the past."⁵⁸ Another commented that, "cults are nothing new" and that this was associated with a rise in fundamentalist activity that has been around a long time. He cited William Miller as one of the main examples of these fundamentalist movements, and discussed the rise of Seventh-Day Adventism and explained that sometimes these religions become mainstream rather than remaining enclaves. He also explained, however, that "cults" differ from mainstream religions. "Potential cult leaders cannot function within the sane boundaries of established religion," he explained, "They must find their way to the fringes where there are still openings for the position of messiah."⁵⁹ Scholars interviewed in many of the articles focused on describing what "cults" were while still defining boundaries between what constituted a "cult" and what constitutes a "mainstream religion" Likewise, they concentrated on attributing the rise in fundamentalism to individuals showing increasing uncertainty and fear about the future. Each of these

⁵⁷ Julia McCord, "Fundamentalism Gains Strength, Theologian Says," *Omaha World-Herald*, April 5, 1993: 9.

⁵⁸ Julia McCord, "Fundamentalism Gains Strength, Theologian Says."

⁵⁹ David Hunter, "Charismatic or Manipulative?: Cult Leaders often Feed on Human Misery." *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, March 17, 1993: A19.

efforts—differentiating Koresh from mainstream religious thought and tying him to uncertain and unstable followers—served to underscore a negative picture.

Articles that featured the views of those close to Koresh, rather than distant experts, did offer a somewhat different picture, but it was not clear enough to counter the weight of the mainstream negative perspective. Interviews with Koresh's family and neighbors painted a different picture than a charismatic leader recruiting vulnerable individuals. Some of them believed Koresh and the Branch Davidians to be peaceful; others maintained that since becoming the leader of the Branch Davidians, he had undergone a complete transformation. Robyn Bunds, a former member of the Branch Davidians explained that, "he was really nice. He was humble. He was very well-mannered. Over the years, though, he's lost a lot of those qualities. He's become this obnoxious, foul-mouth, pushy person because of the power he has over these people."⁶⁰ His family told reporters that he had always been a mild-mannered and a positive influence, but that his interest in religion had caused him to change. His father told KHOU-TV in Houston, "I told him I didn't want to talk religion. The time I'd seen him before, he preached at me the whole time."⁶¹ His mother explained that he always had a passion for religion, memorizing the New Testament when he was 12. She said that he would "come home and go out to the barn and pray for hours."⁶² His grandmother, Erline Clark, said that it was "mostly the coldness of the church he was in that affected him."⁶³ This grandmother attributed his alleged personality change to rejection on the part of the members of the Adventist church in Tyler, who pushed him away after he developed a

⁶⁰ Bill Minutaglio and Jeffrey Weiss, "Law officers close in on cult- Divided Davidian- Kin call Koresh loving; others say he's a bully." *Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 1993: 1A.

⁶¹ Minutaglio, Bill and Jeffrey Weiss, "Law officers close in on cult."

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Bill Minutaglio and Jeffrey Weiss, "Law officers close in on cult."

“romantic attachment to the daughter of an Adventist minister.”⁶⁴ Most of his family members, and those who met him, thought him to be out of the ordinary and that some of the accusations, namely the one about young wives, may have been true, but that he was not dangerous, and not a child abuser. Those who lived in the surrounding areas also called Koresh odd, but not dangerous. Bellmead Police Chief Robert Harold said that there had never been any previous complaints about the Branch Davidians since the 1987 gun battle among sect members and that, “We just knew [the Branch Davidians] were a bunch of mad folks.”⁶⁵ Local law enforcement largely agreed with Harold, though McLennan County Commissioner Lester Gibson said that he had been informed that prior to the Sunday shootout, authorities had been keeping a “close eye” on the group. John Zanter, a hay farmer living not far from the Branch Davidians described them as good neighbors, “they didn’t bother nobody. They stayed to themselves,” he said.⁶⁶ Neighbor Zanter’s view notwithstanding, clearly many of those who sought to defend Koresh and his religious followers still managed to present a view that the rest of the public could be wholly comfortable with.

As the preceding accounts of early analysis of the conflict make clear, from the beginning of the coverage about the Branch Davidians, comparisons were already being drawn to Jonestown as well as other fundamentalist movements. This context was important not only because of the associations with “cults” and “cult followers” but also because it brought fears of impending danger and disorder. Prior to Jonestown the stereotype surrounding Hare Krishnas and Moonies appeared to be that their leaders

⁶⁴ Bill Minutaglio and Jeffrey Weiss, “Law officers close in on cult- Divided Davidian- Kin call Koresh loving; others say he’s a bully.” *Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 1993: 1A.

⁶⁵ Minutaglio, Bill and Jeffrey Weiss, “Law officers close in on cult.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

recruited college students and idealists who lacked direction in an uncertain world. Though out of the ordinary, and disturbing to many people, these groups were not considered violent. The violence of Jonestown, moreover, was not limited to the mass suicide of the followers of Jones either, as members of the sect assassinated Representative Leo Ryan and his colleagues prior to the mass suicide, which shaped public opinion of the event. The section of the chapter turns to questions about government action in relation to the Branch Davidians, and makes this development within public opinion particularly important. As Americans read about the standoff, including ATF choices and strategies, they initially reacted in support, in large part because of Jonestown-linked fears.

Indeed, the ATF appeared to also have this possibility in mind when they approached the compound. ATF Chief Spokesman John C. Killorin explained that, “officers concluded that anything less – such as surrounding the compound and attempting to coax members into a surrender – could result in a situation analogous to the 1978 mass suicide in Guyana of the followers of the Rev. Jim Jones.”⁶⁷ Killorin himself also agreed that Waco could have turned into Jonestown. He said to reporters, “You want to draw the analogy? It was Jonestown. There was a high potential for that.”⁶⁸ He explained that unlike the visit of Congressman Leo Ryan to Jonestown, however, federal authorities aimed to catch cult members off guard before they faced arrest.

The ATF were not alone in drawing such a worrisome comparison. Newspapers around the country filled with those who appeared to share the same fears. Ed Briggs, a staff writer for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* argued that, “the accounts brought back

⁶⁷ Michael Isikoff and Pierre Thomas, “Report on Cult’s Arsenal Prompted Sunday’s Raid,” *Washington Post*, March 2, 1993: A1.

⁶⁸ Michael Isikoff and Pierre Thomas, “Report on Cult’s Arsenal Prompted Sunday’s Raid.”

memories of the mass suicide on November 19, 1978, in Guyana.”⁶⁹ Cody Lowe, a staff writer for the *Roanoke Times*, commented that, “not since the Jonestown suicides of 1978 have Americans been so enthralled, upset and mystified by a religious cult as they have by David Koresh and the Branch Davidians.”⁷⁰ Throughout the coverage of the Branch Davidian standoff, the references to, “Jim Jones and the poisoned Kool-Aid” were numerous.⁷¹ Not all scholars or individuals, however, were convinced that Waco mirrored Jonestown.

While some scholars drew comparisons to Jonestown, others were more reluctant to form such conclusions. Lynn E. Mitchell, described as “the resident scholar in religion at the University of Houston,” stated that, “the Jonestown mass suicide was more complicated than [the] cult incident near Waco.”⁷² Mitchell told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* that he did not expect the Branch Davidian members to take their own lives. Dr. David Bromley of Virginia Commonwealth University and Dr. J. Gordon Melton of the University of California at Santa Barbara both echoed Mitchell’s sentiments. Bromley explained that, “the reason for the Jonestown suicide was that there was no place for the cult to go. Its workers’ paradise in the middle of a South American jungle would be shut down and the only way to keep the outside world from victory was suicide.”⁷³ He explained that the Branch Davidians were set apart from those in Jonestown because they

⁶⁹ Ed Briggs, “Jonestown Repeat Unlikely, Sociologists say- Reaching Israel to Await Christ Still a Goal for Branch Davidians,” *Times-Dispatch Staff Writer*, March 5, 1993: A8.

⁷⁰ Cody Lowe, “Professor: Cults make all the right promises to prospects,” *The Roanoke Times*, March 28, 1993: B1.

⁷¹ Cecile White, “Standoff at Cult Compound- Splinter Sects Share Features- But experts say most not violent.”

⁷² Anita Baker, “Cult group violence not unusual.” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 1, 1993: 12.

⁷³ Ed Briggs, “Jonestown Repeat Unlikely, Sociologists say.”

“still have a goal” to move to Israel for the second coming of Jesus Christ.⁷⁴ Like Mitchell, Bromley speculated that David Koresh and the Branch Davidians would not orchestrate a mass suicide.

One of the more interesting aspects of this early analysis, in hindsight, is actually how many experts did not anticipate the outcome of the tragedy in Waco. Despite the parallels that had been drawn to Jonestown, most scholars were initially optimistic and did not see a mass suicide as a possibility.

Another parallel that drove analysis was the 1985 confrontation with members of the MOVE cult, largely because of the government intervention involved. Debbie Mitchell Price, a columnist for the *Star-Telegram* explained in March (well before the Branch Davidians acted in fanatical ways) that “most of us expect people, even certifiable fanatics, to behave as normal folks would – until they don’t.”⁷⁵ She noted that the Philadelphia Police department made this mistake in their confrontation with members of the MOVE cult by “underestimat[ing] the strength of the fortified MOVE row house and the staying power of the MOVE members.”⁷⁶ Like the standoff with the Branch Davidians, MOVE also stockpiled guns and police officers appeared caught off-guard by the firepower that the religious commune held. Without knowing the extent of the comparison, she explained that, “with both MOVE and the Branch Davidians, there were charismatic leaders, rumors of child abuse and questions of hostages. There were reports

⁷⁴Ed Briggs, “Jonestown Repeat Unlikely, Sociologists say- Reaching Israel to Await Christ Still a Goal for Branch Davidians.” *Times-Dispatch Staff Writer*, March 5, 1993: A8.

⁷⁵Debbie Price, “Hindsight makes it easy to criticize the raid on the Waco cult, but law enforcement is always a gamble.” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. March 2, 1993: 1.

⁷⁶Debbie Price, “Hindsight makes it easy to criticize the raid.”

of explosives and major arsenals.”⁷⁷ As she concluded her article, she defended law enforcement’s actions in MOVE, arguing that they were “caught in the middle every time.”⁷⁸ A writer for the *Washington Post*, William Raspberry, also said that while he didn’t have “any more good ideas for dealing with the Branch Davidians than [he] had for dealing with MOVE eight years ago, doing nothing seemed a bad option.” Raspberry appeared, like Price, to back the federal government because there appeared to be no better solution.

As journalists and the public alike sought to learn about the Branch Davidians, the ATF and the reasons for the standoff, they spent much of their time discussing who caused the standoff. After the invasion of the compound, the ATF commented that the element of surprise had been lost. In explaining their own weakened position, they often attributed responsibility to the media, who, they believed, alerted the Branch Davidians that were under scrutiny, and perhaps offered a direct warning. In particular, they questioned whether the *Waco Tribune-Herald*’s cover story, “The Sinful Messiah,” should be blamed for tipping the Branch Davidians off about the ATF. An Associated Press report claimed that the *Waco Tribune Herald*’s report, “call[ed] attention to the weapons and discussed accusations by former members that Howell sexually abused girls in the compound.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, “television reporters knew of the raid in advance- it was not clear how- and were there before it began. Cameras recorded the scene as federal agents wearing body armor crawled up ladders into roofs of the compound, only to be

⁷⁷ Debbie Price. “Hindsight makes it easy to criticize the raid on the Waco cult, but law enforcement is always a gamble,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. March 2, 1993: 1.

⁷⁸ Debbie Price, “Hindsight makes it easy to criticize the raid.”

⁷⁹ Associated Press, “6 Killed in Shootout with Cult- 4 U.S. Agents Dead, 15 hurt in a Texas Battle.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. March 1, 1993: 1A.

blasted from machine-gun fire from within.”⁸⁰ Despite this comment, however, Royster, special agent for the Dallas field office, said that the “timing of the raid on Sunday was not related to that report.”⁸¹

Journalists and those writing letters to the editor appeared to support the ATF’s decision to go ahead with the raid despite the exposé in the morning newspaper, explaining that they had no idea they would be walking into a shootout on the day of the raid. Debbie Price noted that she, “won’t pretend to know what the ATF agents were thinking...but it is hard to believe after seeing the Waco TV station’s video of men scrambling up ladders, over the roof, climbing into windows, leaving themselves exposed and vulnerable to gunfire, that they expected the resistance they got.”⁸² While she discussed the idea that the Waco TV station may have had prior knowledge of the raid, she did not fault them completely, and stood by the ATF as well. Others also found it absurd that the media would be blamed for anything in regard to the raid. Jack Warner, a staff writer for the *Atlanta Constitution* explained that, “in most journalistic circles, the *Tribune-Herald*’s accomplishment [of a timely, well-written report] would have been greeted warmly,” But instead, Warner lamented, Bob Lott, the editor of the newspaper, is was asked, “whether his newspaper is to blame for the deaths of six people, four of them agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.”⁸³ For her part, the managing editor of the *Tribune Herald* explained that the newspaper’s actions were justified. Although the ATF had been in contact with the paper for some time prior to the

⁸⁰ Associated Press, “6 Killed in Shootout with Cult- 4 U.S. Agents Dead, 15 hurt in a Texas Battle.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. March 1, 1993: 1A.

⁸¹ Associated Press, “6 Killed in Shootout with Cult,” 1A.

⁸² Debbie Price, “Hindsight makes it easy to criticize the raid on the Waco cult, but law enforcement is always a gamble,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 2, 1993: 1.

⁸³ Jack Warner, “Why would anyone blame the Waco paper?” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1993: A8.

investigation, the *Tribune Herald*'s editorial board ultimately had the say in when to print the information about David Koresh. While the public scrutinized the *Waco Tribune Herald*, they generally accepted the paper's stance. Bob Lott, the editor of the *Waco Tribune Herald* explained his position by saying, "After several days of careful consideration, we decided it was time to let the public know about this menace who was just outside our city. You can't sit on that sort of stuff if you are a newspaper."⁸⁴

The media questions, however, did not just stop with the *Waco Tribune Herald*'s publication of "The Sinful Messiah." While that controversy centered on the media's role in thwarting the ATF's mission, more commonly critics raised the question of whether or not the media had surrendered its role as an objective observer in service of the government's mission. Lou Chapman, a writer for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, wrote about several examples in the early coverage of the standoff where the press yielded to the requests of the federal agents. He explained that, "KRLD/1080 in Dallas agreed to air several times a brief message that had been ironed out between Howell [Koresh]...[and] the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms."⁸⁵ He provided evidence as well of the other ways that the Bureau used the media, with the station also airing "pieces of scripture prepared by Howell" and interviewing him only after they checked with federal agents. When he asked the station why they did these things, they explained that they aired the message and the scriptures because they were told it "would save lives."⁸⁶ Chapman raised the question, however, of whether the media should cooperate. While the media had generally cooperated with law enforcement, he polled both news stations and

⁸⁴ Associated Press. "Newspaper published cult story when law enforcers failed to act." *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. March 1, 1993: 8.

⁸⁵ Lou Chapman, "Tough Calls' – Media Face Question of Where to Draw Line," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*: March 2, 1993: 7.

⁸⁶ Lou Chapman, "Tough Calls' – Media Face Question of Where to Draw Line."

scholars alike to see if they agreed. One scholar, Don Gilmore, head of the Silha Center for Media Studies and Law at the University of Minnesota explained that he “would violate any ethical principle {he] could to save a life.”⁸⁷ He believed that if people’s lives were in jeopardy, the media should cooperate. He also wondered whether this, “blur[red] the line between reporting a scene and becoming an actor on its stage.”⁸⁸

In addition to the scrutiny that the public gave to the media, roughly 30 percent of those who wrote letters to the editor also had questions about the ATF, the Federal Government and their actions regarding the standoff. Many individuals raised questions from a more liberal perspective, and hoped for more government help for those that were misguided and chose to follow Koresh. Decidedly, the most common question that these letter-writers had at this point was about strategy, specifically why they had decided to move when they knew that the “element of surprise” had been lost. Some who took this point wondered instead if the ATF should not have avoided the raid altogether, and instead resolved matters peacefully. In response to this point, ATF agent Jack DeVore explained that starting in the spring of 1992 through the month when the raid started there appeared to be, “consistent shipment of high-powered weapons into the group’s compound.”⁸⁹ When they observed the consistent movement of weapons into the compound and also learned of David Koresh’s religious beliefs, including his self-proclaimed title of Messiah and Marc Breault’s testimony of child abuse and polygamy in the compound, the ATF decided to investigate further.

⁸⁷ Lou Chapman, “Tough Calls’ – Media Face Question of Where to Draw Line.” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*: March 2, 1993: 7.

⁸⁸ Lou Chapman, “Tough Calls,” 7.

⁸⁹ Michael Isikoff and Pierre Thomas, “Report on Cult’s Arsenal Prompted Sunday’s Raid,” *Washington Post*, March 2, 1993: A1.

Some letter writers had a more critical position, even at this early stage. Vic Feazell, the former District Attorney for McLennan County, where the Branch Davidian compound was located, believed that the ATF should have treated the Branch Davidians like human beings, “rather than storm-trooping the place,” and more could have been accomplished as a result.⁹⁰ Roughly 20 percent of the letter-writers went farther in their criticism, and questioned the government’s credibility. A resident of Long Beach, CA wrote a letter to the editor which stated that the federal officials should, “plan on reassessing the enforcement abilities of the ATF,” and that even though “zealotry and...treachery played a part in this terrible fiasco...that doesn’t excuse the grievous loss of life.”⁹¹ Some also questioned why the federal government got involved. One resident wrote to the editor saying, “I don’t mean to imply that the priorities of the government are moronic, but isn’t the neighborhood crack house more of a threat than a bunch of Bible-thumpers in the desert?”⁹² Many individuals writing letters wondered if this was an effective use of their tax dollars, citing that the standoff “costs taxpayers an estimated half-million dollars per day.”⁹³ As the standoff progressed, more and more letters surfaced in many of the national newspapers, especially those outside Texas, with the public wondering why the standoff mattered in the first place.

Not surprisingly, given the controversy surrounding gun control, roughly forty percent of those who wrote letters to the editor brought up the need for more or less gun control. Some argued that the federal government violated second amendment rights, others that the too relaxed gun laws in Texas brought about the conflict. A California

⁹⁰ Roy Bragg, “Standoff at cult-compound- Ex-prosecutor laments agents’ “storm-trooper tactics.” *Houston Chronicle*, March 2, 1993: 7.

⁹¹ Shootout in Texas, *Long Beach Press Telegram*, March 2, 1993.

⁹² Was Waco Raid really worth the high cost, *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 17, 1993: A13.

⁹³ Editorial, *Austin American Statesman*, March 23, 1993: A8.

reader claimed that the episode in Waco exemplified “our government’s systematic destruction of the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.”⁹⁴ In contrast, those who supported stricter gun control often cited the ease with which Koresh obtained guns. As one North Carolina reader explained in Texas, “a gun purchaser only has to walk into a gun shop, fill out a federal firearms form and walk out with a newly purchased weapon of just about any type” and that the Branch Davidians “became pretty good at it.”⁹⁵ Others in favor of enacting legislation because they believed the Branch Davidians had crossed a line of legitimate gun ownership. Bill Thompson, a columnist for the *Fort Worth Star Telegram* held this opinion. Thompson argued that the ATF had to protect the safety of the people in Waco, and that David Koresh claimed that he, “has explosives powerful enough to blow the government’s armored vehicles 50 feet into the air.”⁹⁶ For Thompson, such a stockpile posed a legitimate threat, and the ATF needed to act. Though the American people had their second amendment rights, Thompson averred, “neither of these amendments, nor any imaginable combination of the two, gives some monomaniac with a gun in one hand and a Bible in the other, the right to stockpile illegal weapons and conduct religious warfare.”⁹⁷ While people may have disagreed with the ATF’s actions, he believed that they were merited because Koresh could have put Waco, and government officials in danger, and he threatened to do so. Threatening the federal government and presenting a danger to others showed that he crossed the line, and that his decision to stockpile guns could affect other people’s well being as well.

⁹⁴ The Waco Cult, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 12, 1993: A22.

⁹⁵ Growing Anti-Gun Sentiment Has NRA Shooting Blanks, *Greensboro News & Record*, March 18, 1993: A13.

⁹⁶ Bill Thompson, “A goofy suggestion: Koresh is a victim of religious persecution,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 10, 1993: 1.

⁹⁷ Bill Thompson, “A goofy suggestion.”

During the standoff, members of Congress also responded to shifting public opinion. At this point, given that the majority opinion still approved of government action, it is perhaps not surprising that those who sought to extend government regulation acted first, even before the tragic outcome. Rep. Charles Schumer (R-NY) and Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-AZ) introduced a bill that would, “ban the importation of five types of military assault weapons,” and “beef up penalties for the use of an assault weapon,” among other things.⁹⁸ Rep. Mike Synar believed that it would “help put the police back on top in the balance of firepower.”⁹⁹ Many journalists commented that President Clinton could expect to gain support for the new gun control regulations he hoped to put forth at the end of the standoff.

It is important to realize that at this early moment, while the raid continued, not all letter writers came from the “too much government camp.” Roughly thirty percent of those that discussed the ATF thought that them or other government agencies simply needed better preparation or training. Dr. Tony Cooper, a University of Texas at Dallas professor who advised the government on terrorist issues explained that, “no federal or civil law enforcement agency is trained to do a military style assault.”¹⁰⁰ He believed that the ATF “miscalculated” the firepower that the Branch Davidians had and could not be prepared for what came. The ATF, at least when interviewed by the media, appeared to agree with Cooper. Sharon Wheeler, a spokeswoman for the ATF said, “the problem we had [when raiding the compound] is we were outgunned. They had bigger firearms than

⁹⁸ Jim Myers, “Synar Among Backers of Revived Gun Bill.” *Tulsa World*, March 23, 1993: A9.

⁹⁹ Jim Myers, “Synar Among Backers of Revived Gun Bill.”

¹⁰⁰ Nancy St. Pierre, “Experts say raid doomed from start- Firepower, element of surprise seen as lacking.” *The Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 1993: 1A.

we had.”¹⁰¹ A controversial report also appeared in national newspapers by an undercover agent who claimed that he had “told his supervisors in Waco and Washington to cancel the action because Mr. Koresh had gotten a telephone tip warning that ATF agents were on the way.”¹⁰² ATF officials disagreed. As one ATF investigator contended, “No call was made to Washington. All the decisions were made in Waco.”¹⁰³ The undercover agent’s tip, however, did lead to them speeding up the raid, making it start 20 minutes earlier than originally planned, out of fear that Koresh would destroy evidence or try to leave the compound. Over the course of the 51-day standoff, interviews with ATF officials often centered on their strategy.

While the ATF as well as the media came under scrutiny during their handling of the Branch Davidian standoff, the majority of the people and the journalists agreed that the Branch Davidians deserved most of the blame, for many reasons. The first reason pertained to public understanding of the Branch Davidians’ mentality at the time of the assault. Even those who believed that the ATF and federal government should not have invaded the compound still believed that the Branch Davidians were not capable of rational thought and could not be stopped. A New Orleans Police officer involved in the standoff said, “they will fight to the end. They have that mentality that they will die for their cause” and he believed that the cult members thought fighting this battle could be, “their path to heaven.”¹⁰⁴ Those writing editorials appeared to share that view. An editorial written to the *San Francisco Chronicle* stated that, “too often, people,

¹⁰¹ ATF Agents Our View: Texas Firearm Laws are Intolerably Lax, *Rocky Mountain News*. March 2, 1993: 27.

¹⁰² Christy Hoppe, “Hopes for sect surrender dim- Group discounts hope of post-Passover end to standoff,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 9, 1993: 28A.

¹⁰³ Christy Hoppe. “Hopes for sect surrender dim.”

¹⁰⁴ Nancy St. Pierre, “Experts say raid doomed from start- Firepower, element of surprise seen as lacking,” *The Dallas Morning News*, March 2, 1993: 1A.

desperately in need of something to hold onto, are tempted to surrender to charismatic religious or political leaders.”¹⁰⁵ Many writing editorials also cited Koresh’s quote, “we are ready for war. Let’s get it on,” describing him as a leader who could not be reasoned with.¹⁰⁶ Many did worry that confrontations like the standoff underway only made his group stronger and less likely to negotiate, including over the release of children inside the compound.. FBI agent Richard Swensen explained that, “them [the children] coming out is somewhat their call,” and that while authorities could negotiate and try to get the Davidians out of the compound, the situation was mostly out of the hands of law enforcement.¹⁰⁷

In this post-Jonestown moment, the majority of letter writers, journalists and interviewed participants, believed that the Branch Davidians, by stockpiling guns, threatening the federal government and presenting themselves in a way that could be perceived dangerous, were most at fault for the standoff. Because of its timing, then the Branch Davidian conflict differed from past dealings with New Religious Movements. While most New Religious Movements, like the Hare Krishnas and the Moonies, were known for open proselytizing, none of them were perceived as threatening in a violent sense. When the Jonestown mass suicide occurred in 1978, it proved to be the turning point for the media and scholars alike. The public perceived New Religious Movements thereafter as potentially dangerous. Both the ATF and the media sought to understand the Branch Davidians by consulting with scholars, so they understood how to handle and negotiate with them. The ATF, when beginning the raid, was met with violence by the

¹⁰⁵ Striking a poor bargain, *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 5, 1993: A25.

¹⁰⁶ Mark Potok and Robert Davis, “Sect leader warns: ‘We’re ready for war,’ *USA Today*. March 9, 1993: 1A.

¹⁰⁷ Striking a poor bargain.

Branch Davidians, who knew that the raiders were coming. Although the Davidians suffered some casualties, they were able to negotiate a cease-fire. Rather than reacting quickly, like they did during the raid on the MOVE group, the authorities tried negotiating with the Branch Davidians and tried to find ways to get them to calmly resolve the dispute, without resorting to violence.

The media, while observing the ATF's response to the Branch Davidian conflict, had a number of questions for the ATF and the Branch Davidians alike. In the case of letter writers and individuals polled, the majority viewed the government favorably in their handling of the conflict. There were also, however, much smaller groups of people (ten to twenty percent) who had grievances with the government. Some perceived a violation of their Second Amendment rights, while others had a grievance with the more relaxed gun laws in Texas. Some people disliked how long the negotiations with the Branch Davidians were lasting, but others thought that a measured approach was necessary. The majority of the people watching the Branch Davidians feared that this would either become another mishandled raid, like the MOVE group raid, or worried that if the Davidians were left to their own devices, they would end like the Jonestown victims.

CHAPTER FOUR

PUBLIC PERCEPTION AFTER THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN CONFLICT

When discussing the ending of the Branch Davidian conflict, columnist Ellen Goodman commented that, “One minute the compound in Waco was burning, live and livid in color. The next minute, an entire Rolodex of experts, filed under "C for cult," had been called for their opinions.”¹⁰⁸ She felt that she “was not, “even allowed time to be simply appalled. No time to absorb the images of the Koresh children who had died by fire and/or by father.”¹⁰⁹ After fifty-one days of coverage in newspapers and on television, the fire made for an abrupt end to the conflict. The violent, unexpected conclusion prompted a series of investigations, and the evidence found there, as well as the raw feeling Goodman invoked brought new questions about the FBI and ATF’s actions in the conflict

Ultimately, a shift in attitudes about New Religious Movements and about government intervention emerged. While New Religious Movements such as People’s Temple received overwhelmingly negative press, the conclusion of the Branch Davidian conflict left the press with many questions, especially because of the distance the press had to keep from the compound. During the conflict, the media largely rallied around the federal government’s effort, analyzing the theology of the Branch Davidians, examining the allegations of abuse, and explaining the rationales behind the ATF’s involvement with the New Religious Movement. After the fire, questions arose from the press and public alike, especially about the government’s involvement. Columnist Walter Williams wrote, shortly after the fire, “There are other "cults.' I bet Utah's Mormons have loads of

¹⁰⁸ Ellen Goodman. “Waco Flames Shouldn’t Burn the President,” *The Newark Star-Ledger*, April 28, 1993.

¹⁰⁹ Ellen Goodman. “Waco Flames Shouldn’t Burn the President.”

guns. Will they be the next Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms victims?”¹¹⁰ He also echoed the sentiments of many of the journalists that voiced their opinions about the compound, saying, “You really have to wonder what our country is coming to when people who go about their lives bothering no one, minding their business and cherishing their privacy, are subject to a vicious attack by their government while muggers, thieves, rapists and murderers run rampant.”¹¹¹

Despite the skepticism of the press, the majority of the public did not become skeptical of federal government action until more than two years after the standoff, once the congressional hearings and subsequent lawsuits involving the Branch Davidians. The shift is apparent in changing poll results. An ABC News Poll taken shortly after the fire asked “Who do you think is to blame for the shootout that started the incident?”¹¹² The majority, 76 percent of those polled, believed that the “cult members” started the incident and only 12 percent felt that the federal agents should be blamed.¹¹³ When asked whether or not the FBI should have ended the standoff, 72 percent approved and 24 percent of those polled disapproved of the FBI’s effort. The difference in opinion is reflected in a Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll taken six months after the fire, that 45 percent of those polled believed the actions of the federal agents were responsible directly for the fire and 44 percent believed their actions to be irresponsible in a general way.¹¹⁴ This poll mirrored the initially divisive news coverage of the post-fire press about the standoff.

¹¹⁰ Walter Williams, “Who’ll be next victim of federal excess?” *The Dallas Morning News*, May 1, 1993: 27A.

¹¹¹ Walter Williams, “Who’ll be next victim of federal excess?”

¹¹² ABC News Poll, April 17, 1993.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹¹³ ABC News Poll, April 17, 1993.

¹¹⁴ Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, September 10-14, 1993.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹¹⁴ Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll, September 10-14, 1993.

Many also questioned the government's credibility in how they portrayed their handling of the conflict. A CBS News Poll showed that 51 percent of those polled believed that the actions of the federal government were a "cover-up" and that only 33 percent believed that it was not.¹¹⁵ While those polled were still divided, this split differed significantly from polls taken in 1993, which almost overwhelmingly supported the federal government and concluded that the Branch Davidians were at fault. Much of this shift away from support of federal authorities at Waco had to do with the divided press constantly providing new evidence about the actions of both sides in the standoff.

While many people may have disagreed with the way the ATF and FBI handled the Branch Davidians, the religious group was not the beneficiary of that skepticism, and were consistently viewed in an unfavorable light. Instead, in public opinion, the government may have mishandled the Branch Davidian standoff, but that the Branch Davidians still should not have been stockpiling guns; furthermore, many in the public disagreed with their religious practices, which they considered to be taboo.

Immediately following the Branch Davidian conflict, many editorials expressed desire for a Congressional hearing, so that more evidence regarding the conflict could be brought to light. This did not happen, however, until July 1995, shortly after the Oklahoma City Bombing. After Timothy McVeigh, the perpetrator of the Oklahoma City bombing, faulted the government's handling of the Branch Davidian conflict as his motivation, the government acted with t to investigate the Branch Davidian conflict, and in turn, brought more evidence to the public.

¹¹⁵ CBS News Poll, April 15-17, 2000.

Poll questions retrieved October 17, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

With each anniversary of Waco and every subsequent documentary produced about the conflict, the events of Waco became a constant reference for many for what happens when federal government interventions go awry. The opinions of the public and scholars alike, shifted. Rather than dismissing or labeling the Branch Davidians as a “cult” or arguing that the government did the best they could in the situation, commentators came to agree that authorities’ responses in Waco could have been much more effective.

Shortly after the fire, journalists asked questions about the fire and the federal government’s handling of it. Coverage of the Waco events was extensive, more so than any previous New Religious Movements. Journalists portraying the event appeared divided, some in support of the federal government, others in support of the Branch Davidians and their rights. Both, however, raised many questions about the federal government and whether or not they mishandled the siege.

Some journalists appeared to be disappointed with the federal government, criticizing their handling of the conflict. Paul Craig Roberts from the *Washington Times* compared the federal government’s actions in the conflict to the German government’s actions during the holocaust. He argued that, “What happened in Waco was not calculated murder, but that it was manslaughter akin to a drunken driver running down a child.”¹¹⁶ He argued that the government took action and ended the standoff because “if the Branch Davidians could hold out, others might get the same idea...there was too much rebellion in the defiance of authority.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Paul Roberts, “Rallying around Reno,” *The Washington Times*. May 7, 1993: F3.

¹¹⁷ Paul Roberts, “Rallying around Reno.”

Some countered that the Branch Davidians had left the federal government no choice but to end the standoff the way they did. A journalist from the *Christian Science Monitor* argued that the Branch Davidians had an “illegal arsenal” of weapons and that “there can be no mistake that the Davidians were ready and expecting to use it, and perhaps it would have caused greater loss of life than what occurred.”¹¹⁸ The author wrote, “I am reassured when conventional authority is looking out for our interests and is willing to risk their lives.”¹¹⁹ Jerry Alley, a reporter for the *Virginian-Pilot*, argued that the Branch Davidians were unpredictable and that the government had done the best they could under the circumstances. He asked, “What would they have said had the president ordered that nothing be done at the cult compound? Would they have called him a coward?”¹²⁰ He stated that this could not have been solved rationally because “Koresh and those who marched to his commands had lost contact with reality...blindly faithful to the cause, whatever it was, they may have chosen death over what most of us consider civilized behavior.”¹²¹ Many journalists found David Koresh to be out of touch with reality and the government forced to resort to violence in the hopes that Koresh might allow the children to leave the compound. One journalist commented, “Reason might have prevailed two years ago when concerns about a mass suicide first emerged, but when standoff Day 51 rolled around, the government played its trump card. It didn’t work as planned.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ “Public Response and Speculation After Waco,” *Christian Science Monitor*. May 6, 1993: 20.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jerry Alley, “There are Lessons in the Waco Tragedy,” *The Virginian Pilot*, May 5, 1993: 6.

¹²¹ Jerry Alley. “There are Lessons in the Waco Tragedy.”

¹²² “We must learn from the Ashes of Waco,” *Akron Beacon Journal*. April 21, 1993: A13.

At the conclusion of the standoff, many people as well as journalists found that the federal government ATF and FBI had misled the public about their actions. The *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, when interviewing the survivors of Waco, stated that, “each of the six surviving cult members, in separate discussions with lawyers, consistently gave versions at odds with the FBI’s account.”¹²³ An article for the *Advocate* stated that, “the contrasts between the two versions, the government’s account of a meticulously planned assault greeted by hasty executions and a fiery mass suicide, and survivors’ tales of a botched federal operation that went fatally awry when a tank knocked over a kerosene lantern inside the compound, seem no less connectable than the worlds of the Branch Davidians and the FBI-led army that surrounded them for fifty-one days.”¹²⁴ They faulted the government for a “massive error in judgment,” arguing that they lost their patience with the Branch Davidians after having negotiated with leader David Koresh for so long.¹²⁵ The trending focus on the government’s impatience as the cause for the tear gas appeared in many editorials. One stated that, “the real reason for the urge to do something after fifty-one days was evident. The agents on the scene were frustrated by their inability to bring the siege to a successful end.”¹²⁶ References to the negotiating agents’ impatience, as well as the lack of communication between the media and the Branch Davidians, would characterize over half of the journalists’ opinions of the occurrences at Waco.

¹²³ “The Final Hours in Waco/Survivors’ stories differ from FBI’s,” *Worcester Telegram and Gazette (MA)*, April 23, 1993: A1.

¹²⁴ Stephen Braun, “End of standoff raises questions, contradictions,” *The Advocate (Baton Rouge, LA)*, April 25, 1993: 8-B.

¹²⁵ Stephen Braun, “End of standoff raises questions, contradictions.”

¹²⁶ Anthony Lewis, “After the buck stops: assessing the Waco tragedy,” *The Sun (Baltimore, MD)*, April 26, 1993: 11A.

Some who watched the tragedy believed that the characterization of the Branch Davidians as “religious fanatics” in part led to the hastiness of the tragedy that occurred. They felt that the true problem lay in the lack of understanding that agents had for the Branch Davidians and their theology. Frank Flinn, a religious studies professor stated that, “government officials, including the White House, were all too willing to play the enemy Beast in David Koresh’s personal Armageddon,” meaning that they misunderstood his theology.¹²⁷ Had they understood David Koresh’s theology and its grounding in the Book of Revelation, the authorities would have known that the violence that the Branch Davidians endured throughout the standoff only served to strengthen David Koresh’s credibility in the eyes of his followers. Religious specialists and theologians claimed that had his theology been understood, a host of problems could have been prevented, including beginning the intervention itself. Reverend Dean M. Kelly, a religious liberties expert affiliated with the National Council of Churches, argued that the government, “never presented a convincing case for its initial charges that the Branch Davidians had a cache of illegal weapons or later claims that children were being abused.”¹²⁸ He argued that the government targeted the Branch Davidians because of their “off-beat theology focusing on Mr. Koresh as messiah, had the ‘cult’ label pinned on them.” Reverend Kelly, along with other theologians felt that the Branch Davidians had been unfairly targeted because of their religious beliefs and them.¹²⁹ Reverend Kelly, along with other theologians, maintained that that the Branch Davidians had been unfairly targeted because of their religious beliefs. Kelly explained that the raiding of the

¹²⁷ Gustav Spohn, “Some fault agents’ understanding of religious fanaticism in cult siege,” *The Dallas Morning News*, April 24, 1993: 40A.

¹²⁸ Gustav Spohn, “Some fault agents’ understanding of religious fanaticism in cult siege.”

¹²⁹ Ibid.

compound occurred due to the FBI's and ATF's lack of education on the teachings of the Branch Davidians, as well as the federal government's eagerness to end the siege. Reverend Joseph Battis explained that he wrote to Attorney General Janet Reno following the fire, stating, "from the beginning, voices of reason have urged restraint and respect for a misunderstood and unpopular religious group. Instead, the voices of fear and religious bigotry have triumphed."¹³⁰ Most religious scholars and theologians agreed that the standoff might have played out differently had there been a greater understanding of David Koresh's religion.

Though scholars and journalists alike speculated on what could have happened following the standoff, when journalists examined the initial reasons for involvement in the compound, they appeared to remain aligned with the federal government. They argued that the federal government had gotten involved not because they disagreed with their religion, but because the Branch Davidians were accused of breaking the law. Journalists aligned with the federal government wrote articles that predominantly focused on the initial reasons for involvement, such as children's reports of abuse. An article written for the *Dayton Daily News* explained that, "the children were subjected to beatings with a wooden paddle for minor mishaps."¹³¹ They also interviewed a president of a foster home, Jack Daniels, who said that, "It's obvious the discipline in there was very harsh," and agreed with the allegations made about abuse in the compound.¹³² A *Chicago Sun-Times* article also details the discipline that these children endured throughout their time in the compound. It stated that, according to the children, "Koresh

¹³⁰ Gustav Spohn, "Some fault agents' understanding of religious fanaticism in cult siege," *The Dallas Morning News*. April 24, 1993: 40A.

¹³¹ "Cult Children's Discipline stopped short of abuse," *Dayton Daily News*. May 6, 1993: 7A.

¹³² "Cult Children's Discipline stopped short of abuse."

ordered them to call him, ‘Dad’ and their parents, ‘dogs,’ and they said they were beaten with wooden paddles for infractions such as spilling milk.”¹³³ These articles largely attributed the disciplining as well as the cause for the standoff in the first place, to David Koresh. A report done by Bruce Perry, the chief of psychiatry at Texas Children’s Hospital stated that, “A permeating and persistent fear of displeasing David or betraying his ‘secrets’ is present in all the children- even those as young as 4 years old.”¹³⁴ Abuse proved to be one of the most common justifications for the federal government’s intervention in the Branch Davidians’ compound.

Even those articles that highlighted the abuse in the Branch Davidian compound did not fail to include views from both sides. While Jim Jones had received overwhelmingly negative press coverage, the press appeared to make more of an effort to understand the Branch Davidians. One article that highlighted the abuse occurring in the compound also quoted Branch Davidian attorney Jack Zimmerman. Zimmerman claimed that he visited the compound in order to discuss “legal issues” with the Branch Davidians and that he “never saw any evidence of child abuse.”¹³⁵

Beyond allegations of serious child abuse, the press also sought to portray family members as misguided and blinded by Koresh. One article from the *Palm Beach Post* began with a premise, “If you had told Mary and Perry Jones that they would one day marry off a daughter at 14 and then let her husband impregnate his pubescent sister-in-law, they probably would have thought you were crazy. But that was before David

¹³³ Agence France-Presse, “Cult Children Tell of Life with Koresh.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. May 4, 1993: 1.

¹³⁴ Agence France-Presse, “Cult Children Tell of Life with Koresh.”

¹³⁵ “Cult Children’s Discipline stopped short of abuse,” *Dayton Daily News*. May 6, 1993: 7A.

Koresh.”¹³⁶ Jackson’s portrayal of this family as the “down-home Joneses” indicates that she wanted to show Koresh as the one at fault for this family’s transformation into followers of the Branch Davidians.¹³⁷

When journalists interviewed the FBI and ATF, the majority of the time they portrayed the FBI agents as human and sympathetic to the victims Special Agent Bob Ricks said that while he watched the flames he, “thought about all the things they were never going to see...never going to experience. And to have one evil madman just snuff out their lives because of his own ego is something that is very difficult for us to reconcile with what we think was human nature.”¹³⁸ Ricks described Koresh as a “classic sociopath” and thought that he did not show concern for his followers.¹³⁹

Whereas during the standoff, the question of press cooperation with the ATF was not particularly controversial, afterwards that cooperation loomed larger. Some editorials written following the fire criticized the media’s coverage of the Branch Davidian conflict. An editorial in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* stated that it, “Is disturbing...the way the news media regurgitate all this junk and treat all these people as if they were credible news sources with legitimate stories to tell.”¹⁴⁰ The editorialist theorized that the “media, still smarting from the widespread pounding they took for alleged bias during the 1992 presidential campaign, now appear to be so obsessed with ‘telling the other side’ that they

¹³⁶ Stephanie Jackson, “Mom who lost kin in cult fire still believes- down-home Joneses spent years with Koresh.” *The Palm Beach Post*. May 2, 1993: 1A.

¹³⁷ Stephanie Jackson, “Mom who lost kin in cult fire still believes.”

¹³⁸ “As building burned, agent thought of kids,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. April 23, 1993: 16.

¹³⁹ “As building burned, agent thought of kids.”

¹⁴⁰ Bill Thompson, “Conspiracy Theorists are just plain wrong that FBI set the fire,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. April 23, 1993: 1.

are willing to tell a side that doesn't deserve to be told.”¹⁴¹ Another editorial countered, however, that the Branch Davidians’, “real crime...was their stubborn refusal to bow to conventional orthodoxy and official authority.”¹⁴²

Like the journalists, those who wrote letters to the editor also appeared divided in their views, but increasingly unwilling to give the government the benefit of the doubt following the fiery end of the conflict. Roughly forty percent of letter writers raised the question of why the Branch Davidian standoff could not be resolved in a non-violent manner. One reader asked, “Why couldn’t we put two agents in cars, wait until he went to town for pizza and bust him? Game over, easy as pie.”¹⁴³ Roughly twenty percent of letter writers, who questioned the government’s handling, brought up the Constitutional rights of the Branch Davidians. This reader continued, “If we all don’t start respecting each other’s rights guaranteed under the Constitution, like we haven’t been doing, who really will have won the Cold War?”¹⁴⁴ He, like many others who wrote letters to the editor, contended that this attack infringed on the rights of the Branch Davidians as citizens. Those writing letters to the editor also questioned why the Branch Davidians could not have been left alone, especially since they had coexisted peacefully with the people of Waco prior to the standoff. Philip Spann, a resident of Salt Lake City, wrote, “how many people would have been killed by David Koresh and his group had they simply been left alone? Why did federal agents invade the compound with deadly force to

¹⁴¹ Bill Thompson, “Conspiracy Theorists are just plain wrong that FBI set the fire,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. April 23, 1993: 1.

¹⁴² “Public Response and Speculation After Waco,” *Christian Science Monitor*. May 6, 1993: 20.

¹⁴³ “Waco was botched from start,” *The Advocate*. May 4, 1993: 6-B;S.

¹⁴⁴ “Waco was botched from start.”

serve an arrest warrant for a non-capital crime?”¹⁴⁵ Like Spann, people questioned the validity of the justifications that the federal government made for initiating the standoff. George Bowman, a resident of Harrisburg, asked about the abuse that David Koresh inflicted on the children, he wondered, “Where is the supporting evidence?”¹⁴⁶ Another resident commented that, “President Clinton has expended considerable energy defining [the Branch Davidians]. The Davidians can offer no rebuttal, they are dead,” and requested, “some facts on which [she] may form [her] own opinion. No in-depth analysis...let’s see the guns.”¹⁴⁷ Like the press, many of the people watching the siege and reading about it did not think that they received the whole story.

Despite the overwhelmingly critical take on the Branch Davidian standoff that is reflected in letters to the editor, most of those polled about their views on the Branch Davidians supported the federal government’s actions. When asked whether or not it, “was appropriate for the federal authorities to intervene,” immediately after the conclusion of the conflict, 83 percent found the government’s actions to be appropriate.¹⁴⁸ When asked who deserved most of the blame, 87 percent maintained that David Koresh deserved “a great deal” of the blame.¹⁴⁹ Only 3 percent argued that David Koresh did not deserve blame for the occurrences at Waco. While the writers of the letters to the editor questioned the motivation behind attacking Waco, 73 percent of those polled shortly after the siege felt that “federal authorities [should] have taken action”

¹⁴⁵ “Waco Questions,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, May 7, 1993: A19.

¹⁴⁶ “Government attacks on cultists disgusting,” *The Patriot-News (Harrisburg, PA)*, May 7, 1993:A14.

¹⁴⁷ “When will we see what’s left of Branch Davidians’ arsenal?” *The Washington Times*, May 13, 1993: G2.

¹⁴⁸ Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll April 20, 1993.
Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

against the Branch Davidians.¹⁵⁰ Those who wrote letters often posited that the federal government should have spent more time negotiating with the Branch Davidians rather than using tear gas to end the siege. When ABC News asked, “do you think the FBI should have waited longer?” only 15 percent said yes, with 59 percent feeling that the FBI had waited too long to begin the siege.¹⁵¹ Those who were polled also had a much more pessimistic view about the deaths of the Branch Davidian cult members, with 78 percent believing that the siege, “would have come to a violent end sooner or later.”¹⁵² While the views expressed in popular media largely appeared skeptical toward the federal government and called for answers in regard to the handling of the situation, the majority appeared to be satisfied with the government’s intervention in the Branch Davidian conflict shortly after the fire. When polled about their opinion of the federal government since the standoff, it appeared that the standoff had done little to alter popular opinion of the government in general, with 81 percent of those polled explaining that the “incident in Waco, Texas,” “didn’t have much effect” on their opinions.¹⁵³ While journalists appeared skeptical of the events in Waco, 40 percent of those polled believed the press to be “too critical” of the federal government, and 43 percent believed the press to be “too critical” of the FBI specifically.¹⁵⁴ Like the press, the public also appeared to be conflicted on their feelings toward the events at Waco and the coverage provided. While the public appeared satisfied with the answers the press provided them about the federal

¹⁵⁰ Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll April 20, 1993.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁵¹ ABC News Poll April 17, 1993.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁵² ABC News Poll April 17, 1993.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Times Mirror News Interest Index April 29- May 2, 1993.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

government's role in the conflict, the journalists reporting on the conflict were much more skeptical. Many opined that the federal government provided insufficient explanations to the public for what happened at Waco and wanted to have their questions answered.

The Oklahoma City Bombing altered views on the conflict. The bombing brought the Branch Davidian conflict back into the public consciousness and sparked new curiosity about the events of the standoff that had not been seen since 1993. A Congressional hearing began to investigate the events of the Branch Davidian conflict, and a new Republican Congress contributed to the differing views that the government had in this investigation. The evidence that the government brought to light regarding the conflict coupled with the media's criticism of the handling led to a prevailing skepticism among government officials in addition to the public on the events of the standoff.

A turning point for the public perception of the Branch Davidian conflict proved to be the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing. When Timothy McVeigh attributed his reason for bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building to disappointment for the actions of the federal government at Waco, especially in the context of a newly oppositional Congress following the 1994 bi-elections, the investigation on the happenings of Waco revitalized. McVeigh's mention of the Branch Davidian standoff brought the conflict back into the public eye, and the media began to inquire about the handling of the Branch Davidian conflict, explaining that many of the questions they had asked previously remained unanswered.

The change in opinion appeared most evident in the April 1995 polls taken which compiled popular opinion of the Branch Davidian conflict following the standoff. While

the majority of people polled about the standoff appeared to agree with the federal government, the opinions in 1995 polls showed a gradual change in popular opinion about the Branch Davidians. Polls taken shortly after the Oklahoma City Bombing and anniversary of the fire reflect a change regarding the Branch Davidians and the fairness of the standoff. When asked whether, “the force the government used at Waco was justifiable or excessive,” against the Branch Davidians, only 55 percent believed it to be justified.¹⁵⁵ While this still represented the majority of the public, it decreased greatly from the 73 percent who believed the federal government should have taken action in 1993.¹⁵⁶ When asked if “Congress [should] be holding private hearings on the role of federal agents at Waco,” 60 percent believed that they should.¹⁵⁷ In the same poll, 49 percent believed that the government covered up the events of Waco. Polls also reflect distaste for the handling of the case by the President and Attorney General. A Harris Poll asked, “How would you rate the way in which Janet Reno handled the Branch Davidians?”¹⁵⁸ Those who responded appeared more critical, with only 33 percent saying she did a “pretty good” job, 29 percent saying she did a fair job and 20 percent saying she did a “poor” job.¹⁵⁹ When asked about whether or not “the raids were justified”, the public appeared divided with 60 percent claiming they were and 32 percent claiming they were not.¹⁶⁰ With the addition of the Oklahoma City Bombing to the legacy of the Branch

¹⁵⁵ ABC News Poll April 25, 1995.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁵⁶ Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll April 20, 1993.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁵⁷ Time/CNN/Yankelovich Partners Poll July 1995.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁵⁸ Harris Poll April 25, 1995.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁵⁹ Harris Poll April 25, 1995.

¹⁶⁰ Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll April 20, 1993.

Davidian standoff, more questions began to be raised about the Branch Davidians and the possibility of a re-trial for those involved in the standoff.

With the shift in control in Congress to the Republicans following the 1994 elections, a new set of leaders were in place to respond to the Oklahoma City Bombing. The Republican Congress sought to reexamine the events of Waco. Some of the politicians, such as Senator Arlen Specter (R-Pennsylvania), said that, “his panel should quickly address issues never fully resolved about how federal law enforcement conducted itself at Waco.”¹⁶¹ While some argued in favor of transparency on the actions that the government took toward Waco, others such as Senator Orrin Hatch argued against a congressional investigation. Hatch contended that the, “hearings should be held at some point” but also that “conducting them now would complicate the Oklahoma City investigation.¹⁶² Hatch’s resistance shows that while some Republicans were eager to investigate the events of Waco further, they did not all feel the same way.

The congressional investigation conducted following the Oklahoma City Bombing raised questions that had not previously been addressed concerning Waco. Stuart Wright, a sociologist studying the Waco hearings, explained that the Waco hearings had been biased against the Davidians for many reasons. In the criminal trial, Judge Walter Smith Jr. had declared that the would, “not allow the government to be put on trial” and Wright argued that this unwavering support of the federal government also showed throughout the trial.¹⁶³ Wright explains that Judge Smith “restricted presentation

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁶¹ Dan Freedman. “Debate Rages Anew Over Waco,” *The Times Union (Albany, NY)*. May 14, 1995: A1.

¹⁶² Dan Freedman. “Debate Rages Anew Over Waco.”

¹⁶³ Kopel, David B. and Paul H. Blackman, “No More Wacos: What’s Wrong with Federal Law Enforcement and How to Fix It.” Prometheus Books, Amherst NY, 1997: 238.

of evidence to the 51 days between the initial ATF raid on 28 February 1993 and the final conflagration on 19 April 1993.”¹⁶⁴ Wright argues that by excluding evidence from before and after the standoff, this prevented the jury from looking at the events leading up to the raid and whether or not the standoff needed to happen in the first place. Wright explained that the ATF’s plan of operation, according to the final joint report by the House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight and the Committee on the Judiciary, “was grossly incompetent” and that “it lacked the minimum professionalism of a major federal law enforcement agency.”¹⁶⁵ The final joint report also stated “while the ATF had probable cause to obtain the arrest warrant for David Koresh and the search warrant for the Branch Davidian residence, the affidavit filed in support of the warrants contained an incredible number of false statements.”¹⁶⁶ The final joint report showed that officials investigating the standoff thought the case had been mishandled. They argued that David Koresh could have been “arrested outside the Davidian compound” and they also said that the decision to raid the compound “was made more than 2 months before surveillance, undercover and infiltration efforts were (even) begun.”¹⁶⁷ This shows that that Congress also had questions about the ATF’s actions. By excluding the evidence leading up to the compound before the initial raid on February 28, Wright explains that this altered the way the jury viewed the Branch Davidians.

Articles published shortly after the 1994 trial against the Branch Davidians appeared to echo the sentiment of Stuart Wright. A writer for the *New York Times* article explained that defense lawyers “challenged the accuracy” of transcripts of tapes provided

¹⁶⁴ Stuart Wright, “Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 5, No. 1: 147.

¹⁶⁵ Stuart Wright, “Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial.”

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Stuart Wright, “Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial.”

to the jury.¹⁶⁸ One example they cited was a line described for the jury as “so we only light ‘em as they come in” had been transcribed as “So we only light ‘em as soon as they tell me it’s the last chance, right?”¹⁶⁹ Another defense lawyer, Mike DeGeurin, argued that the more than 100 hours of F.B.I. tapes that the government had from the compound had been reduced to “an hour of excerpts by the prosecution’s audio expert.”¹⁷⁰ He explains that excerpts that may have been more sympathetic to their case, such as “people praying as tanks were bashing in their homes” or “children calling for their parents” were not heard. Despite a lengthy trial for the Branch Davidians, many questions still remained unanswered.

As had occurred with the coverage following the conclusion of the standoff, the press during the Oklahoma City Bombing remained skeptical of the government’s actions, but also appeared to defend those actions against militia groups who portrayed themselves as innocent victims. A *Dallas Morning News* article argued that “extremists are not new in American life” but their acts are described as “equal parts arrogance and revisionist history.”¹⁷¹ The article aimed to show that McVeigh and “other militant sorts” aim to prove that “large government forces are out to get regular Joes and Janes,” but in reality, the FBI had, “tried for weeks to coax David Koresh and his followers to come peaceably out of their gun-stacked arsenal.”¹⁷² Following the Oklahoma City Bombing, roughly ten percent of the journalists writing about the conflict reevaluated coverage of

¹⁶⁸ “Prosecution Completes Case Against 11 Koresh Followers,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1994.

¹⁶⁹ “Prosecution Completes Case Against 11 Koresh Followers.”

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ “Militia Madness- McVeighism has nothing to do with patriotism.” *Dallas Morning News*. April 25, 1995: 18A.

¹⁷² “Militia Madness- McVeighism has nothing to do with patriotism.” *Dallas Morning News*. April 25, 1995: 18A.

the event. Several journalists said that that the Branch Davidians may have held more of the blame than was depicted in articles at the time. One article stated that they disapproved of the “tone of the Waco critiques” that had claimed, “that the government stomped the rights of blameless citizens who just wanted to be left alone.”¹⁷³ Those writing letters to the editor in 1993, following the fire, criticized the handling of the situation by the federal government, but by 1995, had shifted in favor of, instead, criticizing the Branch Davidians. Editorial writer Mark Patinkin argues that the “ATF had a federal warrant to go in,” and that there, “[were] specifically, reports of an illegal arsenal.”¹⁷⁴ While in 1993, the press had questioned the actions of the federal government more, the results of the Oklahoma City Bombing led to the majority of those in the press to distance themselves from appearing to defend the Branch Davidians. With the Branch Davidians and Oklahoma City constantly being discussed together because of McVeigh, it became increasingly evident that the media felt a compulsion to undo McVeigh’s logic and distance the Branch Davidians from the Oklahoma City Bombing.

Those who wrote letters to the editor also appeared to be much more supportive of the federal government’s actions. One letter sent to the *Omaha World-Herald* stated “the rights to freedom of speech and assembly do not provide absolute immunity from government scrutiny” and that “the government has the responsibility to investigate any group engaging in activity that poses a threat to society.”¹⁷⁵ Many individuals who wrote letters also sought to understand the mistakes of both sides. One editorial for the *Kansas City Star* stated that, “no reasonable person...doubts that mistakes were made by the

¹⁷³ Mark Patinkin, “Waco’s the Wrong Place to Look.” *Rocky Mountain News*. May 19, 1995: 57A.

¹⁷⁴ Mark Patinkin, “Waco’s the Wrong Place to Look.”

¹⁷⁵ Government Has Duty to Protect Against Threats to Public Safety.” *Omaha World Herald*. April 27, 1995: 22.

federal authorities,” but that the “Branch Davidians, under the leadership of...David Koresh, resisted a lawful federal warrant with deadly force.”¹⁷⁶ As in 1993, the fact that those who died in the compound had chosen to follow the disreputable leader Koresh, a choice that many Americans questioned, continued to serve as a focus when government critics pressed an argument against an over-zealous government.¹⁷⁷

While a small minority who wrote letters to the editor at the time of the Branch Davidian conflict were exceedingly critical of the government, it appeared that the majority of Americans polled and writing editorials rallied behind the federal government and did not wish to associate themselves with the opinions of the Branch Davidians.

For the politically engaged, however, the blurring of recent tensions between government and individuals caused anxiety. Senator Arlen Specter explained that he thought that government leaders were “very isolated” in Washington and that they did not realize, “how really angry the American people are, and [he thinks] Waco and Idaho have contributed materially to it...that’s all you hear about now...is how mad people are about Waco and about Weaver.”¹⁷⁸ The reference to Randy Weaver, the man the ATF arrested during the Ruby Ridge standoff and shootings in 1992, was significant. When Timothy McVeigh was interviewed, he expressed negativity toward the government for their actions against Randy Weaver and the Branch Davidians. McVeigh and Terry Nichols had been following the story of Randy Weaver and Timothy McVeigh told interviewers that he was shocked and he said, “This is America?”¹⁷⁹ They followed the Ruby Ridge

¹⁷⁶ Bob Peter, “Why so sensitive, conservatives?” *The Kansas City Star*. May 20, 1995: 31.

¹⁷⁷ Bob Peter, “Why so sensitive, conservatives?”

¹⁷⁸ Holly Yeager, “In blast’s wake, hearings set on Waco raid.” *Austin-American Statesman*. May 4, 1995: A10.

¹⁷⁹ Brandon Stickney, *All-American Monster: The Unauthorized Biography of Timothy McVeigh*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1996: 155.

story and became angry about the direction the country had taken. When *Newsweek* interviewed him, he explained that he was “bothered” by the government’s actions at Waco and that those involved “most definitely” made mistakes.¹⁸⁰ By bringing up both the events of Ruby Ridge and the events of Waco, the two were brought together and for right-wing movements, symbolized what could happen when federal government intervention went awry.

A broader spectrum of the public, however, appeared much more threatened by the actions of participants in militia movements than of the government overstepping its bounds. In an ABC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll conducted in June 1995, 62 percent of those polled stated that they thought investigating “the activities of private militia groups around the country” mattered more than the way the events of Waco were handled.¹⁸¹ Only 21 percent thought the events of the 1993 raid mattered more. Fear of militia movements also appeared as a common trend in letters to the editor about the Oklahoma City Bombing. One editorial described them as “Rambo wannabes” who “denounce the federal government as their mortal enemy.”¹⁸² They discussed Waco as well, saying that, those movements “see in the Branch Davidian debacle in Waco and the bloody FBI assault on a white supremacist’s home in Idaho a government not only capable of destroying Americans...but entirely willing to do so.”¹⁸³ After the Oklahoma City Bombing by Timothy McVeigh, the fear of private militia began to increase. Many journalists criticized the actions of those in the militia movement. Following the bombing, the editorial explained that, “Talk shows oozed with confusion and

¹⁸⁰ Brandon Stickney, *All-American Monster*.

¹⁸¹ NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* Poll June 2-June 6, 1995.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

¹⁸² “Militia Groups- Paranoid Patriotism.” *The Herald Sun* (Durham, NC). May 3, 1995: A12.

¹⁸³ “Militia Groups- Paranoid Patriotism.” *The Herald Sun* (Durham, NC). May 3, 1995: A12.

misinformation about Waco” and that the “allegations were thrown out carelessly and irresponsibly.”¹⁸⁴

Those not fearful of militia movements and Oklahoma City brought up the possibility of a re-trial for Waco as well. One letter explained that, “there should have been, in 1993, a thorough investigation for the tragedy near Waco.”¹⁸⁵ Paul Greenberg of the *Washington Times* asked, “How can you tell people are being condemned without the inconvenience of a trial?”¹⁸⁶ More tellingly, he charged that condemnation without trial was indeed underway because the media and government referred to the Branch Davidians as “members of a cult rather than a religion” and at that point, “the accused would seem to lose their civil rights, not only in life, but after death.”¹⁸⁷ The government heard those who requested a retrial, and in July of 1995, the Congressional Hearings on the events of Waco began.

As preparation for Congressional Hearings began in July 1995, the press coverage of Waco became divisive along party lines. As the new evidence came forth, the press coverage showed that Republicans appeared to focus more on the flaws of the ATF and FBI raid, with the Democrats defending the actions of Bill Clinton and Janet Reno. This evidence also appeared to broaden the views of those following the bombing and Waco standoff. The emergence of the clear evidence regarding child abuse that occurred during the standoff also lessened the credibility of the Branch Davidians to some.¹⁸⁸ Along with the right-wing extremists supporting the Branch Davidians, the politicians, especially

¹⁸⁴ “Waco Hearings Raise Concerns that More Paranoia Win Result.” *Omaha World-Herald (NE)*. July 11, 1995:6.

¹⁸⁵ “To No Point,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. May 13, 1995: 38.

¹⁸⁶ Paul Greenberg, “Unanswered after Waco.” *The Washington Times*. May 17, 1995: A18.

¹⁸⁷ Paul Greenberg, “Unanswered after Waco.”

¹⁸⁸ “Audio Tapes Indicate Davidians Set Fire to the Waco Compound.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. July 8, 1995:A-5.

President Clinton, worried about the outcomes of the Congressional Hearings. The Washington Post described the White House, “[fearing] the worst” in the *Washington Post*, where Clinton worried that the hearings would, “hurt his chances for reelection.”¹⁸⁹

The Congressional Hearings of 1995 had permissible evidence that differed from that of the murder trial in Waco. The actions of the ATF and FBI leading up to the raid were under investigation in addition to the occurrences during the standoff. Lawrence Sullivan, a religious historian, explained that one of the new points that had been brought up during the murder trial was that the ATF “deni[ed] consulting religion experts prior to the February 28 raid” and that they relied on the sometimes erroneous accusations given by prior followers of the Branch Davidians, mainly Marc Breault.¹⁹⁰ Sullivan said it became evident to him that during the trial, the FBI dismissed the religious beliefs of the Branch Davidians, as “bible babble.”¹⁹¹ Sullivan felt that had the FBI and ATF looked into the religious beliefs of the Branch Davidians further, the standoff may have ended differently.

The testimonies of Branch Davidian witnesses, however, provided insight into why the FBI and ATF became involved. Kiri Jewell, a fourteen-year-old girl who had lived in the compound and testified during the Congressional hearings, revealed that she had endured sexual abuse there. . She also spoke about the Branch Davidians’ previous plans of mass suicide, explaining that they had, “talked about using cyanide for a mass

¹⁸⁹ “Administration Faces Tough Week as Hearings Open,” *The Washington Post*. July 17, 1995.

¹⁹⁰ Lawrence Sullivan, “No Longer the Messiah”: US Federal Law Enforcement Views of Religion in Connection with the 1993 Siege of Mount Carmel near Waco, Texas,” *Numen* 43, No. 2: 220.

¹⁹¹ Lawrence Sullivan, “No Longer the Messiah.”

suicide.”¹⁹² The article described “the testimony from Jewell...brought a joint hearing of two house subcommittees to stunned silence after hours of partisan bickering.”¹⁹³

As Jewell and other children discussed their experiences in the compound, government critics said, “they could not defend Mr. Koresh, but that did not justify the force used against him and his intensely religious followers.”¹⁹⁴ Witnesses also said that the federal government had known about David Koresh’s vision of how his followers would die. They explained that Koresh thought “the enemy [would] surround the camp and the saints will die,” and that “there will be blood and fire and an explosion.”¹⁹⁵ The witnesses explained, however, that the federal agents did not take the vision seriously enough to avoid planning an ending to the siege that would prevent those three elements. The statements of the witnesses echoed Sullivan’s theory about the federal government neglecting the religious component of the Branch Davidians throughout the standoff. Joyce Sparks of the Texas Department of Child Protective Services explained that “once [federal agents] sought to end their 51-day siege with a tear-gas assault, the rest was inevitable.”¹⁹⁶

The media’s coverage of the Waco hearings and its implications for the public were analyzed shortly after the Congressional hearings concluded. The Center for Media and Public Affairs explained that “the commercial broadcast networks showed little interest in the hearings” and that “the evening news shows on ABC, CBS and NBC

¹⁹² Charles Sennott, “Hearings on Waco Begin with Political Accusations.” *Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)*. July 20, 1995: A5.

¹⁹³ Charles Sennott, “Hearings on Waco Begin with Political Accusations.”

¹⁹⁴ Lee Hancock, “Hearings Begin in Waco Case- Witnesses differ over actions of sect, agents.” *The Dallas Morning News*. July 20, 1995: 1A.

¹⁹⁵ Tim Weiner, “Waco Warnings Ignored, Witnesses Testify.” *Daily News of Los Angeles*. July 22, 1995: N17.

¹⁹⁶ Tim Weiner, “Waco Warnings Ignored, Witnesses Testify.”

together devoted only 26 stories and 45 minutes of airtime to them—about one minute per network throughout the two week period.”¹⁹⁷ Many journalists and people alike found the coverage of the Congressional hearings to be dramatic and the coverage to be biased. David Rosenbaum, a writer for the *New York Times*, commented on July 23, that “these hearings...seemed more like political sideshows than high drama” and that “[Kiri Jewell’s testimony was] more appropriate for ‘Oprah’ than a Congressional committee.”¹⁹⁸ The media analysis explained that “virtually all evaluations of the [Branch Davidians] were negative—88 percent overall, including 93 percent of comments about Koresh.”¹⁹⁹ Congress, especially those involved in the GOP-led investigation, were similarly criticized, and given a 79 percent negative rating.²⁰⁰ The ATF also received criticism, with “74 percent negative coverage out of nearly 200 evaluations,” which was attributed to the ATF’s accusations that the Branch Davidians had engaged in drug trafficking being dismissed as false.²⁰¹ The FBI received only slightly more support than the ATF, with 65 percent negative evaluations by the press.²⁰² Janet Reno and the rest of the Judicial Branch received favorable coverage from the press, which contrasted greatly with the unfavorable views that were given to her initially following the standoff. While the media did not cover the Congressional hearings as extensively as the standoff itself, their coverage did influence public perception of the Branch Davidians. Anthony Downs, a scholar studying public opinion, explains that “cue givers” that he describes as “social leaders whose views are transmitted through the media or individual acquaintances who

¹⁹⁷ Center for Media and Public Affairs, Watching the Waco Hearings, How the Media Covered the Congressional Hearings on Waco: *Center for Media and Public Affairs*, 6 No. 4: 2.

¹⁹⁸ Center for Media and Public Affairs, Watching the Waco Hearings.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Center for Media and Public Affairs, Watching the Waco Hearings.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Center for Media and Public Affairs, Watching the Waco Hearings.

are perceived as comparatively well informed on the issue at hand” influence much of the public’s views on current events.²⁰³ The reliance on the media to provide accurate information greatly influenced perception of the conflict.

The testimonies of witnesses—who clearly were abused—along with the detailing of the actions of agents—which clearly were precipitous and done without thought to the context—during the Congressional hearings evoked a wide variety of opinions from the general public about the Branch Davidians and what occurred during the standoff. In one letter, a proponent of gun control theorized that “some conservative ideologues (including the high command of the National Rifle Association)...have made a martyr of the likes of David Koresh.”²⁰⁴ Another reader argued that both the Branch Davidians and the federal government “over-reacted” to the situation.²⁰⁵ A *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reader wondered why the federal government did not, “understand the psychology of the man” explaining “we had plenty of models in history with Jim Jones’ Guyana tragedy as a more recent example.”²⁰⁶ Whereas the memory of Jonestown during the standoff had led people to support government action against this group, that memory two years later inclined at least one reader to consider caution.

The changing views of the Branch Davidian standoff between 1993 and 1995 raised many questions about New Religious Movements and federal government intervention. The questions that scholars such as Lawrence Sullivan posed about the absence of religious analysis in the ATF’s decision to raid the compound helped to reshape policy toward New Religious Movements. Stuart Wright reported that the FBI

²⁰³ Adam Berinsky. *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York, Routledge, 2011.

²⁰⁴ “Making a Monster a Martyr.” *Staten Island Advance*. July 28, 1995: A26.

²⁰⁵ Larry Witham, “Davidians and Officials overreacted, were hasty.” *The Washington Times*: August 5, 1995: B8.

²⁰⁶ James Baden, “The Waco Mistake.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (PA)*. August 26, 1995: A6.

“was told by Attorney General Reno to develop an advisory group of experts on unconventional religious movements whom they could consult in similar incidents should they arise in the future.”²⁰⁷ Her suggestions became a component of what is now the “Critical Incident Response Group.”²⁰⁸ Since that time, when handling subsequent New Religious Movements, there has been more of an effort to understand them rather than simply dismiss them as cults.

The critical issue appears to be the role of language in the media. Anthony Downs explains in his study of popular opinion that the average citizen “cannot be expert in all the fields of policy that are relevant to his decision. Therefore he will seek assistance from men who are experts in those fields, have the same political goals he does and have good judgment.”²⁰⁹ Downs’ findings about media influence are particularly appropriate when considered alongside Wessinger’s research on the word “cult.” If the media uses the term “cult” in a negative way, the term will likely be accepted by the majority of the readers as negative.

Catherine Wessinger contends that the Branch Davidians were “obstructed from explaining their religious beliefs to the American public” and that “all we saw in the media were depictions of a deranged looking David Koresh...by this I mean that, because the news did not depict the Davidians as human beings, the media coverage produced a cultural consensus that their deaths did not warrant public outcry.”²¹⁰ Paul Olson’s sociological study on the use of the term New Religious Movements reflects Wessinger’s

²⁰⁷ Stuart Wright, “Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 5, No. 1: 145.

²⁰⁸ Stuart Wright, “Justice Denied: The Waco Civil Trial.”

²⁰⁹ Adam Berinsky. *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York, Routledge, 2011: 52.

²¹⁰ Catherine Wessinger. *How the Millennium Comes Violently*. New York: Seven Bridges, 2000: 20.

theories on the word cult. When those polled were asked if the government should be able to regulate the activities of “cults” 56 percent answered that they should.²¹¹ Though no “cults” were specified during the study, the word evidently carried a stigma as only 25 percent agreed that the government should be able to regulate the activities of New Religious Movements. Olson and Wessinger, as well as other scholars, have since advocated for the end of the use of the word “cult” and the understanding of New Religious Movements.

The media coverage of New Religious Movements was indeed influenced by the Branch Davidian conflict. The word “cult” has since not been used in scholarly writing or newspaper articles, and New Religious Movements which have been identified in the past as “cults” such as the Church of Scientology and the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints, have since been labeled as fundamentalists by the media, or as new or marginal religious movements by scholars. Rather than dismissing the religious component as irrelevant and strictly examining the offenses by the New Religious Movements, the federal government, media and scholars alike have instead sought to understand them.

As the Branch Davidian standoff becomes more and more a distant memory of federal government and fundamentalist Christianity facing conflict, it appears that the lessons that individuals took from Waco remain relevant on both sides. Whether perceived as an example of the negative effects of big government, the Branch Davidian standoff has come to be an oft-used reason to justify violent acts. Every year, articles are written commemorating or making mention of the Branch Davidian standoff as the public continues to ask questions about what ‘actually happened’. The most recent polls,

²¹¹ Paul Olson, “The Public Perception of "Cults" and "New Religious Movements," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45. No. 1: 97.

concerning the Branch Davidians, taken in 2000, appear to not deviate much from the polls taken during the Congressional hearings and around the time of the Oklahoma City bombing. They reflect a country divided, with some people skeptical, and others satisfied with the story told of the events of Waco. A CBS News Poll asked if those polled thought “the truth [about Waco] would come out,” and like the media, the public also answered in a divided fashion, with 47 percent believing that the truth will come out, and 47 percent believing that the truth “can’t be found out.”²¹² When asked if they approved or disapproved of the way the FBI and other authorities, “handled the standoff” only 41 percent approved of the way they handled it, and 40 percent disapproved.²¹³ The divisiveness lends itself to very different portrayals in the media of not only the events in Waco, but also of David Koresh himself.

The upshot of these questions have only resulted in more theories, however, rather than more insight. One columnist attributed Clinton’s re-election to the idea that the “racial make-up of the Mount Carmel community” had not been disclosed.²¹⁴ His theory, based on an assumption that liberals dislike “Bible-belt” conservatives was “your friends” will describe the Branch Davidians as “white, Bible toting, gun-loving Christians,” most of the Davidians were minorities.²¹⁵ He argued that the Clinton’s election could have been shaped by his reaction to the conflict if more minorities, a dependable Democratic constituency, has realized that other minorities the were the target.

²¹² CBS News Poll. April 15-17, 2000.

Poll questions retrieved September 21, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

²¹³ CBS News Poll. April 15-17, 2000.

²¹⁴ Jack Cashill, “Why AG’s ‘Buck Stops Here’ Gambit worked in ’93.” *WorldNetDaily*. October 17, 2012.

²¹⁵ Jack Cashill, “Why AG’s ‘Buck Stops Here’ Gambit worked in ’93.”

Many of those who have committed violent acts since have attributed the reasons behind their actions (or had their motivation attributed by others) to the events of Waco. In February 2010, Joe Stack flew his plane into the Austin, Texas office of the IRS, leaving behind a “lengthy disjointed screed in which he complained about his failure to find work, the crimes of corporations, and, most of all, his hatred of the IRS, with which he had been feuding for years.”²¹⁶ The article explains that, “the jury is still out on whether Stack will become the martyr of the antitax movement, joining Timothy McVeigh, the Branch Davidians of the Waco siege, and others in the pantheon of extremist heroes.”²¹⁷ As well as being portrayed as ‘martyrs’ of the right-wing, the Branch Davidians are also often credited with the emergence of militia groups. One article describes “militias and ‘patriot’ groups” as coming about because of “anger of the Clinton administration’s push for landmark gun-control legislation and federal officers’ aggressive tactics in high-profile standoffs with groups such as the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas.”²¹⁸

In many cases, the federal government’s involvement in the Branch Davidian standoff is regarded as failed or mishandled. When discussing right-wing criminals, the newspapers and authorities alike often express the hope to avoid “another Waco.” It has also come to be associated with standoffs in general. When one article discussed John Gray’s unwillingness to leave his home and show up to a court sentence, a headline writer quipped, “Waco it’s not,” while the journalist writing about Gray’s sentence

²¹⁶ Peter Grier, “Joe Stack IRS attack: All-American rage?” *Christian Science Monitor*. February 23, 2010.

²¹⁷ Peter Grier, “Joe Stack IRS attack: All-American rage?”

²¹⁸ Kevin Johnson, “Militias Seen Gaining Strength.” *USA Today*. April 16, 2010: 3A.

interviewed authorities who discussed their hopes to avoid another Waco.²¹⁹ When a suspect in a Connecticut kidnapping threatened to kill his ex-wife during a standoff lasting over thirteen hours, he also compared the situation to the standoff, asking if “authorities could endure a standoff that would be longer than the 51-day confrontation in Waco.”²²⁰

The popular cultural use of the Branch Davidian standoff is also not limited to right-wing extremism. When a resident of Green Valley, Arizona, wrote to the editor in protest against the government’s control over school lunches, he urged readers to, “recall, furthermore, what the feds did to the Branch Davidians and their children in Waco, Texas, just a few years ago.”²²¹

Whether the Branch Davidian standoff is characterized as a rallying call for right-wingers in defense of civil liberties, or as an example of federal government gone awry, the events of Waco, over the past twenty years, remained in the public consciousness. Though the standoff lasted only fifty-one days, it became one of the more controversial topics of discussion in our modern religious history. The events of Waco compel a wide variety of emotions and thoughts, with many still trying to uncover why the events happened the way they did. Waco has also become a cause for the federal government to rethink its reactions to New Religious Movements. Since Waco, the federal government has limited violent action against New Religious Movements, and has since relinquished power of intervention in these events largely to the state and local governments.

²¹⁹ Angela Brown, “Waco it’s not: Texas man who disdains government and is wanted on a felony warrant has been holed up on his property for 10 years, awaiting a showdown that never materialized.” *Lewiston Morning Tribune (ID)*. June 27, 2010: A6.

²²⁰ “Court Hears Tapes of Standoff,” *The Advocate (Stamford-Norwalk, CT)*. October 4, 2011.

²²¹ William Maratos, “No ‘fat police’!” *Green Valley News and Sun (AZ)*. December 28, 2010.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE BRANCH DAVIDIANS AND THE SHIFT IN POPULAR MEDIA PERCEPTION

Just as the Branch Davidian conflict changed the way scholars and press handled future New Religious Movements, the conflict also affected popular culture, and the way films and television shows also portrayed New Religious Movements. According to Adam Berinsky, a political scientist researching public opinion, “public opinions are more frequently matters of sentiment and disposition rather than reasoned preferences.”²²² Over time, through exposure to New Religious Movements, Hollywood and other purveyors of popular culture created many stereotypes about these movements’ beliefs that are revealed in popular media. A sociological study conducted by Paul Olson reflects this view. When asked about cults, 75 percent described cults negatively, with only one participant offering a positive description of the movements. Out of those polled, 80.2 percent of the participants admitted that they had no contact with a cult member and 91.7 percent of the participants “were basing their perceptions on some form of media presentation.”²²³

In the first movies and documentaries focused on New Religious Movements, the protagonists are traditionally idealistic college students, and they often join groups such as the Unification Church and the Hare Krishna movements. During this time parents are shown as being concerned about the religious affiliations that college students held.²²⁴ None of the concerns parents have, however, involve possible violence on the part of the New Religious Movement. Within portrayals following Jonestown, however, have come

²²²Adam Berinsky. *New Directions in Public Opinion*. New York, Routledge, 2011

²²³ Paul Olson, “The Public Perception of “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45. No. 1: 97.

²²⁴ Brock Kilbourne, “Equity or Exploitation: The Case of the Unification Church,” *Review of Religious Research* , 28, No. 2: 143-150.

darker views of the leadership of New Religious Movements, and confused notions of government mediation and competence.

From the early 1970s through the 1980s, depictions of New Religious Movements centered on groups that emerged during counter-culture years, including most prominently the Hare Krishnas and the “Moonies,” which was not surprising since these groups were the most significant New Religious Movements of the era. The Moonies and Hare Krishnas both fit descriptions as “new religions” and “quasi-religious groups.”²²⁵ Both of these terms were scholarly acceptable terms to describe what are currently known as New Religious Movements. Parents feared their children becoming involved in these New Religious Movements, with a group forming following the Jonestown mass suicide called the “Citizens Freedom Foundation” an organization dedicated to stopping religions from what they felt to be psychological manipulation of their children.²²⁶ This reality for some parents mirrored the portrayal in popular media. In the HBO TV-movie *Moonchild* (1974), which centers on the Moonies, many of the members of the group discuss why they decided to join this communal society. One member explained that he “wasn’t sure what [he] was looking for. He was out of school looking for some adventure,” and explained that he “really found a purpose here.”²²⁷ Another member explained that he started out wanting to go into business, but found that those in business engaged in dishonest practices.

Many of the members who decided to become part of the Moonies were college students who found their idealistic notions of the world shattered, whether due to work or

²²⁵ Brock Kilbourne, “Equity or Exploitation: The Case of the Unification Church,” *Review of Religious Research*, 28, No. 2: 143-150.

²²⁶ Brock Kilbourne, “Equity or Exploitation: The Case of the Unification Church.”

²²⁷ Anne Makepeace. 1983. *Moonchild*. DVD. Anne Makepeace Productions.

traumatic experiences. In “Ticket to Heaven,” a group of college students choose to join the cult modeled after the Moonies. It starts out with the protagonist, David, meeting a girl and choosing to go with her to visit a group that she calls her “family.”²²⁸ The members of her “family” display similar idealism while in the group. When Greg explains his background and what drove him to be a part of this group, he tells them that when he graduated from Harvard, he had the goal of being a millionaire, but while he worked for a business, he was put in the uncomfortable position of lying to his friend in a financial transaction. After this point, he started looking for additional meaning in his life because he felt directionless.²²⁹ Another member of the family, Bonnie, explained how “lost” she felt in her relationship life. She said that it felt good to share with other people. Like Greg and Bonnie, David also began to find more meaning in his time there when he started to share with the other members of the cult, and the movie details his involvement in the cult.

The movies also have a common trend of a charismatic leader. “Moonchild” and “Ticket to Heaven” both show a charismatic leader who rewards those involved in the New Religious Movement and uses the friendships forged in the group as a way to control members. Whenever David tries to take a walk, or inquires about when he can return home, there is always at least one person by his side trying to convince him to stay. When he talks to his parents, another member of the family, Ruthie, is in the phone booth with him as he tells his friend that he is staying with the family. When he visits his brother, two members of the family accompany him as well. When he ignores his brother

²²⁸ Ralph Thomas. 1981. *Ticket to Heaven*. DVD. Canadian Film Development Corporation (CDFC).

²²⁹ Ibid.

and convinces him that he is happy living in the compound, he is given positive reinforcement by the leader, and is assured that he did the right thing.²³⁰

The members of these New Religious Movements are also portrayed as unable to think for themselves, and often helpless. Family members act as rescuers for those who are a part of the New Religious Movement. At one point, the protagonist's family, having learned that he joined a New Religious Movement, tries to kidnap him, but he repudiates them rather than appreciating their effort, and they end up arrested. At this point, he notably did not feel any remorse because he felt that "Satan [gave] him the instruction to leave, not God."²³¹ Only later on in the movie did he conclude that his family tried to kidnap him out of selflessness and love. The plotlines to "Ticket to Heaven," and "Moonchild," typify New Religious Movements.

The movies on New Religious Movements reflect the public sentiment at the time. Many thought that those involved in New Religious Movements were idealistic college students aiming to be part in some of the movements of the counterculture. During the 1970's, anti-cult organizations and some scholars tried to attribute the rise of New Religious Movements to "the weakening of conventional family values."²³² Sociologists such as Kenneth Kenniston and Christopher Lasch conducted a study in which they hypothesized that "young people have sought involvement in primary or quasi-primary groups" in the hope of finding "deep interpersonal relations in a communal

²³⁰ Ralph Thomas. 1981. *Ticket to Heaven*. DVD. Canadian Film Development Corporation (CDFC).

²³¹ Ralph Thomas. 1981. *Ticket to Heaven*.

²³² Stuart Wright and Elizabeth S. Piper, "Families and Cults: Familial Factors Related to Youth Leaving or Remaining in Deviant Religious Groups," *Journal of Marriage and Family*: 48, no. 1:20.

context.”²³³ Kenniston and Lasch thought that future members sought a similar family structure in New Religious Movements because they lacked traditional family structure. They argued that that “cult members [were] psychically coerced into displacing primary loyalties to biological families” and that “damage to the family relationship” happens as a result of the curtailed interaction with family.²³⁴ Though theories such as those by Kenneth Kenniston and Christopher Lasch were later proved to be unsubstantiated in studies conducted in the 1980’s, their perspective found support in the plotlines of movies of the day. That is, the hypotheses that scholars were testing and the views of the public during the 1970’s and 1980’s both faulted the decline of the family for their children’s involvement in New Religious Movements. Additionally, the portrayal of the charismatic leader as villain indicated that screenwriters, following popular opinion, blamed corrupt leaders for the involvement of individuals into New Religious Movements.

Though the events of Jonestown did little to change public perception at the time, that episode did create more interest in “cults” for the public and for Hollywood, and therefore clarified how popular views and screenwriters reflected similar assumptions. A Gallup Poll taken shortly after the Jonestown mass suicide asked, “How do you, yourself, decide that a religious organization is a ‘cult’ instead of a church religion?”²³⁵ Of the options that were given, 22 percent of respondents stated that a cult had to be led by “a person playing God,” and 15 percent each stated that elements of fanaticism and extremism had to be involved and that the religion had to control the lives of their

²³³ Wright, Stuart and Elizabeth S. Piper, “Families and Cults: Familial Factors Related to Youth Leaving or Remaining in Deviant Religious Groups,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*: 48, no. 1:20.

²³⁴ Wright, Stuart and Elizabeth S. Piper, “Families and Cults.”

²³⁵ Gallup Poll (AIPO), December 8, 1978-December 11, 1978. Poll questions retrieved November 1, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

members.²³⁶ An additional 12 percent of those surveyed thought that in order for a religious organization to be a cult, it had to have teachings that were “not based on any bible teachings.”²³⁷ The resurgence of New Religious Movements in popular media following the Branch Davidian standoff, however, showed a markedly different perception of New Religious Movements.

In the mid 1990’s and into the 2000’s, with the conclusion of the Branch Davidian Congressional hearings and more information about both the Branch Davidians and other New Religious Movements coming into the public consciousness, there began to be more mention of New Religious Movements in popular media. With the mention of several New Religious Movements, including People’s Temple, Branch Davidians and the Christian Identity movement during Ruby Ridge, familiarity grew. Now, most Americans knew about the mass suicide of People’s Temple members in Guyana or the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco. With all of this information about New Religious Movements coming, different stereotypes emerged regarding these movements and those who chose to join them.

The American viewing public had, at this point, been exposed to many different New Religious Movements. The decline of the counterculture and rise of Christian fundamentalism put to rest the idea the only people who could be involved in New Religious Movements were idealistic college students. The attributions to the decline in traditional family values also had faded, as many families joined both People’s Temple and the Branch Davidians. Families were also involved in Christian fundamentalist groups such as the Christian Identity movement. The addition of families to the New

²³⁶ Gallup Poll (AIPO), December 8, 1978-December 11, 1978.
Poll questions retrieved November 1, 2012 from Roper Center iPoll databank.

²³⁷ Gallup Poll (AIPO), December 8, 1978-December 11, 1978.

Religious Movement stereotype changed the traditional way in which New Religious Movements were portrayed. With so many diverse people joining New Religious Movements, the stereotype was replaced by the perception that students were just one group of the many that joined such movements.

One of the changes that occurred during the standoff was the change in “rescuer” or hero of the plot. While previous plotlines had parents rescuing their children from a cult, this did not characterize all of the post-1993 movies. Most of the movies and TV shows depicted local and federal authorities as the heroes rescuing families or individuals from a cult. In *Monk*’s episode “Mr. Monk joins a cult,” he contemplates investigating a cult that someone in his department had fallen into. In this case, the family had told the police about the individual’s descent into the cult.²³⁸ The specifics of the organization were not discussed, however, it was evident that it was the burden of the police to solve the crime and investigate the leader of the cult, not the individual families of the characters in this episode.

Another change that occurred following the standoff was the violence associated with New Religious Movements. Prior to the Branch Davidian standoff, cult members were never portrayed as having a propensity for violence, or as lawbreakers. After the standoff, however, most of the portrayals of cult members and leaders, end or start with a, usually violent, crime that causes the federal government to get involved, much like the Branch Davidian standoff. In an episode of *Law and Order SVU* entitled, “Charisma,” the leader of this group, Eugene Hoff, runs a church called “The Church of Wisdom and Sight.”²³⁹ In this episode, a twelve-year-old pregnant girl named Melanie Cramer is

²³⁸ Monk, “Mr. Monk Joins a Cult.” DVD, 44:00. January 11, 2008.

²³⁹ Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. “Charisma.” DVD, 44:00. November 16, 2004.

reported to SVU as being pregnant, but claiming to have a husband. As they investigate, they learn that the husband is a member of Hoff's church, and that Hoff is using her pregnancy in order to inherit money from her mother, another one of his followers.²⁴⁰ While previous portrayals of the New Religious Movements portrayed the family as heroes, in this case, the family, indoctrinated as well, encouraged participation in the New Religious Movement. This is demonstrated by the beliefs of the mother in the SVU episode. Olivia Benson, when cross-examining a cult member, says, "Now those women out there might be brain-washed, but you're not. You know exactly what he is, a murderer and a child raper...you know who he was and you let this happen."²⁴¹ Sarah denies her assertion, responding, "It was God's will. This is a test. I won't be tempted."²⁴² Familial participation in these New Religious Movements is often portrayed as encouragement in activities such as polygamous marriage. In an episode of *Criminal Minds*, called "Minimal Loss," the lead detectives investigate a cult leader named Benjamin Cyrus, who engages in polygamy.²⁴³ The FBI enters the compound covertly, not realizing that the state police had planned an attack on the same day. An agent asks Cyrus's wife if she can evacuate the children and she responds with "I remember Waco."²⁴⁴ When the agent says that "this isn't Waco," Cyrus's wife responded by saying "They stay here while I wait for guidance from God."²⁴⁵ The family as participants in New Religious Movements, as well as the references to Waco show a changed image of what a New Religious Movement is for those in popular media.

²⁴⁰ Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. "Charisma." DVD, 44:00. November 16, 2004.

²⁴¹ Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. "Charisma."

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Criminal Minds. "Minimal Loss." DVD, 44:21. October 8, 2008.

²⁴⁴ Law and Order: Special Victims Unit. "Charisma."

Criminal Minds. "Minimal Loss."

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

The role of federal and local law enforcement in the portrayals of New Religious Movements is a controversial one that mirrors the controversy associated with the Branch Davidians, and different law enforcement agencies have different reputations. In a *Criminal Minds* episode, the FBI is characterized as smooth in carrying out their attack, whereas the state government is characterized as reckless. While the FBI goes in covertly to plan their investigation, the state police enter with a warrant and start shooting at the compound. As the shooting continues, Benjamin Cyrus yells, “cease fire!”²⁴⁶ He makes sure to say that he “didn’t start this” and the FBI is ultimately able to negotiate a “cease fire.”²⁴⁷ As the FBI tries to convince the members of the group to let them evacuate them from the compound, the members of this fictional New Religious Movement are skeptical because of Waco; they mention it and agents try to reassure them that this will not be “another Waco.” In the movie *Red State*, the ATF agent fears the public relations disasters that occurred after Waco. When the siege occurs, the ATF agent calls up his superior, explaining that, “there are kids in there, I want something in writing that protects my field office” from prosecution in the same way that ATF agents were investigated after real-life tragedy in Waco.²⁴⁸ He explains, while alluding to events such as Waco and Ruby Ridge, that he doesn’t want his organization to be “the bad guys again.”²⁴⁹ When he refers to his organization’s reputation as “the bad guys,” he is making reference to the reputation of the ATF following the Branch Davidian conflict.

In the movie, *The Siege at Ruby Ridge*, the screenwriter characterizes actions of the ATF in a controversial manner. The beginning of the standoff between Randy Weaver

²⁴⁶ Criminal Minds. “Minimal Loss.” DVD, 44:21. October 8, 2008.

²⁴⁷ Criminal Minds. “Minimal Loss.”

²⁴⁸ Kevin Smith. 2011. *Red State*. DVD. NVSH Productions.

²⁴⁹ Kevin Smith. 2011. *Red State*.

and the ATF, they also show the evidence that the ATF includes images and dialogue that imply the ATF may have not been completely truthful. Randy Weaver, throughout the movie, watches the news appalled at how their side of the story is misconstrued. They describe Randy Weaver's property as a "possibly booby trapped fortress."²⁵⁰ When Weaver sees this news coverage, he is surprised at the inaccuracies told through the media. Throughout the movie, the script highlights inconsistencies in the stories told by the media and federal spokesmen. They also depict Randy Weaver's affiliation with the Christian Identity movement as inconsequential, though in the actual case, the ATF made much of that affiliation. In the beginning of the movie, the script shows Weaver only loosely being affiliated with the Aryan nations. Though he told anti-Semitic jokes, when Vicki asked him why he affiliated with those skinheads, he said "we're not Nazis" and then dismissed his affiliation with them as involvement in "survivalist stuff."²⁵¹ Overall, the producer's choices suggest that Weaver was not in a New Religious Movement. When the conflict began, the film shows the Christian Identity followers holding picket signs outside of the compound, but other than that, the film offers little evidence of interaction between Randy Weaver and the Christian Identity groups.

Throughout the film, neither Randy Weaver, nor the ATF or media are portrayed in a completely positive light. The most colorful and most highly regarded of the characters in the film is Bo Gritz, the negotiator. Throughout the movie he is glorified for his ability to mediate between the ATF and the white supremacists and Christian fundamentalists. This portrays the accepted point made by scholars that an effort to understand needed to be made in order to combat these fundamentalist religions. It is

²⁵⁰ Kevin Smith. 2011. *Red State*. DVD. NVSH Productions.

²⁵¹ Roger Young. 1996. *The Siege at Ruby Ridge*. DVD. Victor Television Productions.

Gritz that is ultimately the hero that gets the Weaver family out of their secluded house in Idaho, through mediation. As the children exit, they see a helicopter, many FBI and ATF agents and the local police all crowded by their house. Sarah, Randy's daughter, says as she is exiting, "all this for one family?"²⁵² The conclusion, shown through the eyes of characters that most viewers could identify with, confirm the implication that the screenwriter, director and producers of the film believed that the ATF's response at Ruby Ridge was overblown.

Another change in the presentation of New Religious Movements is the character of the charismatic leader. While usually represented manipulative, by the late 1990's, charismatic leader usually had a more violent side as well. Much of this shift can be attributed to the outcomes of conflicts with New Religious Movements. In the movie, *Red State*, the leader, Pastor Abin Cooper, captures two teenagers. It is made clear later in the movie that his aim is to kill the teenagers, because of their sinful behavior. When the ATF comes to investigate his compound, he immediately resorts to violence and states that, "if the law won't protect us, we'll protect ourselves."²⁵³ Supposing a pastor might have such a distaste for the law is drawn from Koresh's actions during the Branch Davidian conflict. Another example of a violent cult leader is shown in a *Criminal Minds* episode called "The Tribe." In *The Tribe*, footage of the Branch Davidians is shown in the background as they are investigating a murder of five college students in an unoccupied house.²⁵⁴ The plot reveals that the individuals who were responsible for these deaths were a religious group that based their rituals on the Apache. The leader, like David Koresh, had been part of an unstable household, and the agents described him as

²⁵² Roger Young. 1996. *The Siege at Ruby Ridge*. DVD. Victor Television Productions.

²⁵³ Kevin Smith. 2011. *Red State*. DVD. NVSH Productions.

²⁵⁴ Criminal Minds. "The Tribe." DVD, 44:28. March 8, 2006.

“charismatic.”²⁵⁵ They explained that he had a deep interest in Native American culture and turned it into a fundamentalist group. They drew comparisons as well to Charles Manson, arguing that there had been precedent for groups engaging in mass murder of minorities.

These portrayals of violence are not limited to violence against perceived outsiders; in some cases elements of violence against cult members are also involved. In an episode of *Family Guy*, the leader pours arsenic in the Kool-Aid just like Jim Jones does for the mass suicide in Jonestown and when the kids drink the Kool-Aid before the leader had intended them to, he shouts “haven’t any of you ever been in a cult before?”²⁵⁶ In the movie *The Collective*, the protagonist joins the Collective and at first it appears to be a communal society, but the conflict arose within the Collective when a dissenting member of the Collective was murdered within the cathedral and leadership took drastic measures to keep the murder quiet. This murder caused the leader to become stricter and monitor the members of the New Religious Movement more than he had previously.

The motivations of leaders of New Religious Movements were also called into question throughout popular media portrayals of them. In the episode of *The X-Files*, “Via Negativa,” FBI agents discuss a mass murder at a religious cult site.²⁵⁷ When discussing the murderer, the agent scoffs when he explains that the convicted murderer “found God” and that he studied a hybrid of near-Eastern and evangelical religions. They believed that his intentions were malicious and hidden under the guise of religion. Less violent portrayals also show cult leaders starting them for monetary gain. In the *Seinfeld* episode, “The Checks,” George learns of the “Sunshine Cleaners,” a group of people that

²⁵⁵ Criminal Minds. “The Tribe.” DVD, 44:28. March 8, 2006.

²⁵⁶ Family Guy, “Chitty Chitty Death Bang,” DVD. 22:00. April 18, 1999.

²⁵⁷ X-Files, “Via Negativa.” DVD. 45:00. December 17, 2000.

clean houses in order to raise money for their cult, relating it to groups such as the Hare Krishnas who sold things under the guise of raising money for a “Christian group.”²⁵⁸ Seinfeld explains that, “their cleaning is just an excuse to get into your house.”²⁵⁹ The first time that the Sunshine Cleaners come to George’s house, they complete their work and do not discuss their religion. He immediately attributes that to his own possible inadequacy. When they come to clean the second time and also refuse to say anything about their religion, he turns to them as they exit and asks, “What kind of cult is this?”²⁶⁰ That such a line could be played for comedic effect indicates the widely-shared assumptions about cults as looking to acquire many members, in order to increase revenue. An episode of *The Simpsons* shows a similar motivation from the cult leader. The leader of the cult explains that the Simpsons would have to give up their life savings and 10 trillion years of labor, which compared to a stereotype about David Koresh, that he also was motivated by monetary gain.²⁶¹

The Branch Davidian conflict also brought about an increase in portrayals of leaders who were interested in polygamy, often with young girls. These girls, or sometimes women as well, are often depicted as thinking that they are honored to be the wives of the leader. In an episode of *Criminal Minds*, when the FBI agents asked one of his wives, a fourteen-year-old girl named Jessica, she explained that “he is a prophet, it is an honor to bear his children.”²⁶² Another movie, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*, also shows a girl who is in a polygamous relationship with the prophet. . The movie alludes to sexual abuse by the cult leader, similar to the accusations given about David Koresh

²⁵⁸ Seinfeld, “The Checks.” DVD. 30:00. November 7, 1996.

²⁵⁹ Seinfeld, “The Checks.”

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ The Simpsons, “The Joy of Sect.” DVD. 22:00. February 8, 1998.

²⁶² Criminal Minds. “Minimal Loss.” DVD, 44:21. October 8, 2008.

during the Branch Davidian conflict. In one specific vision, she discusses her fears after the trauma she faced and the other member says, “It’s okay, we’ve all done this.”²⁶³ As the movie progresses, the audience hears Martha, despite her personal feelings, say the same words to another girl, Sarah, before it is her first time meeting with the leader. Later on, she is even able to rationalize it as another woman explains to her “you need to share yourself” and says, “You have to trust me that this was truly good. We’ve all gone through it at one time, do you believe me?”²⁶⁴ Despite Martha’s feelings about the trauma she experienced, she nods her head.

In the movie *Holy Smoke*, protagonist Ruth also feels a strong connection to the leader. When discussing the leader with her friends, she tells them that, “he looks at you...and all your fears just vanish.”²⁶⁵ Her friends mock her and make reference to the religious movements where women marry the leaders. Then she says that she’d love to marry the leader because he is “so full of love.”²⁶⁶ Her character, then portrayed as indoctrinated by the leader, mirrors the perception that many people felt about David Koresh when reading about him in popular media.

The undercurrent of cynicism about religion in general also prevails throughout many of the movies and television episodes. To a certain extent, this cultural reference to problems within mainstream religion appeared in all depictions of New Religious Movements, regardless of the time period. The Branch Davidian divide did, however, mark a more dysfunctional element. In the early 1970’s when idealistic college students decided to join New Religious Movements, scholars claimed that these religious,

²⁶³ Criminal Minds. “Minimal Loss.” DVD, 44:21. October 8, 2008.

²⁶⁴ Sean Durkin. 2011. *Martha Marcy May Marlene*. DVD. Fox Searchlight Pictures.

²⁶⁵ Jane Campion. 1999. *Holy Smoke*. DVD. Miramax Films.

²⁶⁶ Jane Campion. 1999. *Holy Smoke*.

“emerged as groups purporting to be able to meet certain of the pressing needs of young people that apparently [could not] be met elsewhere in society.”²⁶⁷ Many young people, scholars argued were not finding answers in traditional churches that they liked. The early 1990’s showed a similar transformation, but within families, who adopted these conservative principles in response to changing times. Many of these groups emerged and rather than being influenced by Asian religions, most were instead more conservative forms of traditional Christian religions. Popular media portrays those who got involved in these religions largely as conservatives who felt threatened by the changing times.

Moreover, by the late 1990’s, the cynicism was as likely to hit mainstream religions, as it was New Religious Movements. In an episode of *The Simpsons*, a priest preaches that that the cult is, “designed to take money away from fools” but at the same time, he also instructs them to say “hail Mary 40 times and pass the collection plate.”²⁶⁸ The laughable attempt by Burns, the CEO of a major corporation in the show, to form his own religion in order to get tax-exempt status also demonstrates the cynicism associated with New Religious Movements. At the conclusion of the episode, Bart shows the cynicism that the public had toward these religious leaders during the 1990’s. He says, “Church, cult, cult, church. So we get bored somewhere else every Sunday. Does it really matter?”²⁶⁹ The sarcasm and humor directed toward mainstream religion showed that people were more open expressing dissenting views on religion. Much of this is also expressed in recent polls regarding religion. A March 2012 Gallup Poll noted that “32 percent of Americans are nonreligious, based on their statement that religion is not an

²⁶⁷ Edward Levine, “Religious Cults: Their Implications for Society and the Democratic Process,” *Political Psychology*: 3, no. 3-4 (Fall 1981): 4.

²⁶⁸ *The Simpsons*, “The Joy of Sect.” DVD. 22:00. February 8, 1998.

²⁶⁹ *The Simpsons*, “The Joy of Sect.”

important part of their daily life and that they seldom or never attend religious services.”

A study done by public opinion scholar Philip S. Brenner also shows that less Americans attend church than originally thought to and that while it is still a part of American identity, it is not a part of actual religious behavior.²⁷⁰

The preceding summary of publicly-available depictions of New Religious Movements is important because of the access it provides to the stereotypes that informed public opinion. The majority of Americans, according to public opinion scholars such as Anthony Downs, are influenced greatly by perceptions and information given to them in the media.²⁷¹ In a 2006 study on New Religious Movements, religious studies scholar Paul Olson survey public opinion on the topic. When Olson asked respondents about cults, 75 percent described cults negatively, with only one participant offering a positive description of the movements. Out of those polled, 80.2 percent of the participants admitted that they had no contact with a cult member and 91.7 percent of the participants “were basing their perceptions on some form of media presentation.”²⁷² This study makes clear that while many individuals have had no contact with these movements, their perceptions of New Religious Movements are greatly influenced by popular media.

Early in the 1970’s, those who joined New Religious Movements were shown as idealistic college students who joined communal living societies due to the prevalence of the counterculture and desire to explore other religions. Many of these college students had their idealism shattered by the world, and looked to the New Religious Movements as a source of support. This is congruent with the views of scholars and parents alike

²⁷⁰ Philip Brenner, “Investigating the Effect of Bias in Survey Measures of Church Attendance,” *Sociology of Religion* 73 no. 4: 361-383.

²⁷¹ Adam Berinsky, *New Directions in Public Opinion*, New York, Routledge, 2011

²⁷² Paul Olson, “The Public Perception of “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45. No. 1: 97.

during this time, who felt that New Religious Movements were preying on vulnerable college students and using tactics of psychological manipulation.

The Branch Davidian conflict altered this perception of New Religious Movements, but not in a positive way. It was after the Branch Davidian conflict that New Religious Movements became increasingly shown as violent, with manipulative leaders who disliked authority. Polygamy and romantic relations between young women and cult leaders also became more prevalent in portrayals of New Religious Movements. The demographics of participants in these movements in the portrayals also shifted from college students to conservative families. As families joined them, it became increasingly evident that the media believed it was the government who could stop these New Religious Movements, not the individual families. The media in the early 1990's portrayed these New Religious Movements for the first time as not just a danger to the individual, but also as a danger to others, as many of the participants in these New Religious Movements committed crimes. As scholars became more open about learning the theology of New Religious Movements, the media appeared to react more negatively toward New Religious Movements, while at the same time questioning the government's capability to handle them. What to do in order to respond to a New Religious Movement would continue to be controversial, though many believed that because of Waco, the nonviolent approach was the more appropriate way of addressing them.

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN CONFLICT

Fifteen years after the conflict, the United States government saw another New Religious Movement enter the public consciousness. The Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints Church (FLDS), while establishing a new compound in Eldorado, Texas, went under investigation by Texas local authorities for allegations of child abuse. While the circumstances were similar to the episodes at Waco and Jonestown, the outcome differed.

In their press coverage, the FLDS never received the label ‘cult,’ and were instead labeled “fundamentalist” Latter-day Saints. Federal authorities did not take the lead on this investigation, and instead when a government-backed intervention occurred on April 3, 2008, it was led by Texas law enforcement, removing mothers and children from their compound. The press made similar comments to those made during Waco. A reporter for USA Today maintained that “arguably, the raid was spurred more by negative stereotypes about the FLDS and members’ practice of polygamy than by a thorough investigation of evidence.”²⁷³ In the case of the FLDS, however, the questions were directed at state law enforcement, rather than the FBI or ATF. Sara Corbett, a writer for the *New York Times* explained that “even after the calls that triggered the military-style raid on the ranch were proven to be a hoax, Texas child-welfare officials persisted in claiming that FLDS children were endangered by what they deemed to be a pattern of sexual and physical abuse at the raid.”²⁷⁴ The description of the investigation as a “military-style raid” also resembled Waco.

The comments made by these reporter were similar to those made by reporters during the time of the Branch Davidian conflict. The stereotypes of previous New

²⁷³ Stange, Mary. “What does Texas Church raid say about us,” *USA Today*, May 12, 2008: 11A.

²⁷⁴ Corbett, Sara, “Children of God,” *New York Times*, July 27, 2008: MM1.

Religious Movements influenced the government action the same way that previous New Religious Movements had influenced action toward the Branch Davidians. When a Texas Public Safety Department official commented on the similarity to Waco, he explained that it had been handled “more [diplomatically]” and that “not a shot was fired.”²⁷⁵ This differed greatly from the approaches that the ATF had taken when confronting the Branch Davidians, indicating that the government had listened to the majority’s stance on the conflict, that a peaceful reaction was best in these cases.

During the coverage of the FLDS raid, it is evident that the press and the government alike thought that they had learned much from the Branch Davidian raid. The 51-day standoff affected coverage and public opinion greatly. While the public clearly did not endorse the practices of David Koresh and Warren Jeffs, the FLDS prophet,, they also did not approve of the government raiding the compound in a violent manner.

The events and outcome of the Branch Davidian conflict have also led to scholarship emerging in regard to new terms to categorize these movements in academia. Religious studies scholars such as Miller and Wessinger have argued that, “the term ‘cult’ has become laden with negative connotations among the general public and media” and “have advocated dropping its use in academia.”²⁷⁶ Some scholars have advocated using the term “New Religious Movements,” preferring no distinguishing connotations of this word other than that the religion is new. Others have preferred the term “Marginal Religious Movement,” to describe a religion that is different from mainstream religions.²⁷⁷ Marginal Religious Movement, as a term, however does not carry the same

²⁷⁵ Stange, Mary. “What does Texas Church raid say about us.”

²⁷⁶ Paul Olson, “The Public Perception of “Cults” and “New Religious Movements,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45. No. 1: 97.

²⁷⁷ Paul Olson, “The Public Perception of “Cults” and “New Religious Movements.”

negative connotation as the word ‘cult.’ Scholarship on possible character flaws in individuals who join cults as well as the qualities of a leader have also been put to rest in later scholarship, and have been mostly dismissed in current scholarship.

In the study of New Religious Movements, Waco proved to be a watershed moment that defined the boundaries of both religion and government’s role in intervening when religions are thought to go awry. Religions described as ‘cults’ entered the public consciousness as a result of the counterculture, with many college students and graduates preferring the communal living structure and alienating themselves from mainstream religion. These religions, while thought by some to be psychologically harmful to these individuals, were not characterized as having a propensity for violence until the catastrophic events of Jonestown. At this time, the public appeared to advocate government intervention in New Religious Movements, and the government acted in this capacity. It intervened in the case of the MOVE group in Philadelphia, as well as the emergence of Christian Identity. Their boundaries were set, however, following the controversial end of the Branch Davidian standoff. At this point, the government had been criticized for their use of violence and scholars and the public alike wondered why religious specialists had not been consulted in the dealings with a fundamentalist group. These accusations would set the tone for future dealings with New Religious Movements such as that of the FLDS.

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