David Koresh: Martyr and Maniac

Word Count: 2500

By: Evan Perry
February 28, 1993 is a date that would haunt our nation’s government for what they had done. For 51 grueling days, the Waco, Texas siege would confuse our nation on who to defend. Was it a just government operation or an attack on American citizens? A question that would plague the minds of many. The fault of the fanatical David Koresh or the brash Janet Reno?

“Vernon Howell,” “David Koresh,” “The Sinful Messiah,” “Cyrus,” - the leader of the Branch Davidians has had many names, but one thing is true about the troubled young man from Houston, he was an extraordinary person. Though his beginnings were not nearly as outstanding.

David Koresh was born Vernon Wayne Howell on a humid August day in Houston, Texas to a 14-year-old mother, Bonnie Clark, and Bobby Wayne Howell. Before David was born, his father met another teenage girl and abandoned Bonnie Clark. Koresh never met his father, and his mother began cohabiting with a violent alcoholic. In later years David recalled the man “beating him black and blue.” Some say that this was the spark leading to his later alleged abuse of children.

When David was four his mother left her abusive boyfriend and sent David to live with his grandmother, Earline Clark. Bonnie returned three years later to bring David to live with her and her new husband, Roy Haldeman. David described his childhood as lonely. Due to his poor study skills and dyslexia, he quickly fell behind in school. He had a pronounced stutter, was put in special education classes, and tormented by his fellow
students. They would call him “retardo” and nicknamed him “Vernie.” Koresh dropped out of Garland High School in his junior year.

At 18 years of age David had a consensual, sexual relationship with a 15-year-old girl who became pregnant. He claimed to have become a born-again Christian in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He knew what he had done was wrong and while praying to God for guidance, he allegedly found his Bible open at Isaiah 34:16, which contains the following passage “none should want for her mate.” Convinced that God had given him a sign, he sought guidance from Adventist elders and told them that God believed he should have the girl for a wife. They aggressively contradicted him and when he began to challenge the elders on different interpretations of the Bible, they threatened to throw him out of the church by force. David inquired about prophets in the church from whom he could seek guidance. But this infuriated the elders, and the only solution they saw was to excommunicate David and the rest of his family from the congregation. They claimed he was setting a bad influence on the younger members of the congregation.

Feeling lost in his search for religious clarity, a friend of David’s suggested a pseudo religious group called The Branch Davidians. The Davidians had settled outside of Waco, Texas on a 189 acre ranch. Leading the Davidians was Lois Roden, who was said to be an anointed prophet. An experienced preacher in her late sixties, Roden attracted many people, including Bonnie Haldeman and her son David who soon moved
to Waco to be closer to the Davidians. He was a handsome man had a boyish charm that people were drawn to. Lois Roden soon invited him to live at Mount Carmel. By day David worked as a carpenter in the city, and by night he was with Lois Roden. They could be together in her study, mulling over scriptures together. She began to let David take over the pulpit during meetings to share his thoughts. It quickly became apparent that Lois Roden was more than a mentor to David when she made a remarkable announcement. She was pregnant, in most environments would be very scandalous, but the congregation took it as a sign from God, a fulfillment of a prophecy.

Soon after, Roden told her followers that she had lost the baby that she was expecting. Nevertheless, she decided that David was her spiritual heir, the next and last prophet, of their sect. Lois Roden died at age seventy and was buried in Israel.

David believed this was his time to take charge and lead the Davidians. Most of the congregation accepted this. However, Lois’s mentally unstable, and sometimes violent son, George Roden had been the presumed successor to his mother. Ever since David arrived at Mount Carmel, George Roden felt that his position of leadership was threatened. He would eventually file a lawsuit in federal court alleging that Koresh had raped Lois and brainwashed her to turn against him.

In 1984, David left the compound for Palestine, Texas with the vast majority of the group’s followers. Driven out by George Roden’s threat of violence. Roden renamed Mount Carmel "Rodenville". In a videotaped interview Roden led a tour of "Rodenville" using an M1 carbine as a pointer and declared: "It’s basically a holy jihad."
Three years later, resentful of David's power over the Davidians, Roden challenged him, saying that whoever could resurrect the dead was the true leader. While Roden prayed over the body of Ana Hughes, a woman who had died two decades earlier, Koresh reported Roden to the McLennan County sheriff's office for corpse abuse. The police told Koresh that he needed evidence to back up his accusation.

On November 3, 1987, Koresh and seven followers returned to Mount Carmel heavily armed and wearing camouflaged clothing. They stealthily entered the compound, allegedly to obtain a photograph of the corpse. However they did not bring a camera. Instead, they carried weapons and a map of the grounds with positions to occupy. They found Roden crouched behind a tree with an Uzi submachine gun and a gun battle ensued for several minutes. Roden fled the property with wounds to his hand and chest. Koresh's compatriots were found not guilty after a two-week trial for attempted murder in Waco, and a mistrial was declared in Koresh's case.

After he was acquitted, David travelled to Israel with his pregnant wife, Rachel, who he had married at Mount Carmel when she was just 15-years-old. While in Israel, David became convinced that God had chosen him as a messenger of the apocalypse. His mission was to decrypt the symbolic Seven Seals from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. Upon his return from Israel, David learned that George Roden had been arrested and was sent to an institution for the criminally insane. This meant that Mount Carmel was now free for the Davidians in Palestinian, Texas to move back. David also began to call himself the Messiah. Since he was an imperfect messiah who understood sin, henceforth he was named “the Sinful Messiah.”
In August of 1989, David made a discovery that would prove most controversial. After studying many passages of the Bible, David concluded that God wanted him to have many wives and for them to bear many children. All the women in Mount Carmel were declared his and his alone. Even married women became his wives, while their husbands were commanded to become celibate. David began to have sex with and have children by these women who, subsequently, bore him children. In the end he would have seventeen children, including three by the sister of his first wife. Stockpiling weapons was also one of God’s commands, according to the apocalyptic-minded Koresh. He began to buy and sell a large amount of firearms. When questioned about the weapons by the authorities, he told them it was for financial reasons. By the spring of 1992, Koresh and the Davidians had amassed $200,000 worth of firearms. It became apparent to the authorities that David was interested in more than just guns when an illegal package containing hand grenades was discovered. This began an eight-month investigation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms tracked the array of weaponry entering Mount Carmel. This included everything from hand guns to assault rifles to grenade launchers. By January of 1993, the ATF had gathered enough evidence to arrest Koresh, but they were warned that any act of force against him would quickly result in bloodshed.

At last the ATF decided to raid the complex, seize the weapons, and arrest Koresh and other specific members. This took place on Sunday morning, February 28, 1993. Any advantage of surprise was lost when a KWTX-TV reporter, who had been tipped off
about the raid, asked for directions from a mail carrier who was, coincidentally, Koresh's brother-in-law. Branch Davidian survivors have written that Koresh ordered male followers to begin arming and taking up defensive positions, while the women and children were told to take cover in their rooms. Koresh told them he would try to speak to the agents. Despite being informed that the Branch Davidians knew a raid was coming, the ATF commander ordered that the raid go ahead.

ATF agents stated that they heard shots coming from within the compound, while Branch Davidian survivors claimed that the first shots came from the ATF agents outside. A suggested reason may have been an accidental discharge of a weapon, possibly by an ATF agent, causing the ATF to respond with fire from automatic weapons. Other reports claim the first shots were fired by the ATF "dog team" sent to kill the dogs in the Branch Davidian kennel. Within a minute of the raid commencement, Branch Davidian Wayne Martin called emergency services, pleading for them to stop shooting. The resident asked for a ceasefire, and audiotapes record him saying, "Here they come again!" and, "That's them shooting! That's not us!"

The first ATF casualty was an agent who made it to the west side of the building before he was wounded. Agents quickly took cover and fired at the buildings while helicopters began their diversion tactics and swept in low over the complex. On the east side of the compound, agents set up two ladders against the side of the building. Agents then climbed onto the roof with the objective of securing the roof so they could reach Koresh's room and the arms storage.
Dozens of ATF agents took cover, many behind Branch Davidian vehicles, and exchanged fire with the Branch Davidians. The exchange of fire continued, but 45 minutes into the raid the gunfire began to slow down as agents began to run low on ammunition. The shooting continued for two hours.

Sheriff Lt. Lynch of the McLennan County Sheriff Department contacted the ATF and negotiated a ceasefire. Sheriff Harwell stated that “the ATF agents withdrew only after they were out of ammunition.” ATF agent Chuck Hustmyre later wrote: "About 45 minutes into the shootout, the volume of gunfire finally started to slacken. We were running out of ammunition. The Davidians, however, had plenty." After the ceasefire, the Branch Davidians allowed the ATF dead and wounded to be evacuated and held their fire during the ATF retreat.

Four ATF agents were killed during the raid, another 16 were wounded. The five Branch Davidians killed in the morning raid were cut down by unnecessarily aggressive assaults. One report states that the Branch Davidians did not ambush the ATF and that they "apparently did not maximize the kill of ATF agents", explaining that they were rather "desperate religious fanatics expecting an apocalyptic ending, in which they were destined to die defending their sacred ground and destined to achieve salvation" (Stone, 1993).

After the raid ended the FBI took over and established contact with David. At first, the Davidians had telephone contact with local news media, and Koresh gave phone
interviews. The FBI subsequently cut Davidian communication to the outside world. For the next 51 days, communication with those inside was by telephone by a group of 25 FBI negotiators. The final Justice Department report claimed that negotiators criticized the tactical commanders for undercutting negotiations.

The situation quickly became a standoff. The government wanted everyone to come out of Mount Carmel so they could face their crimes while the Davidians just wanted to be left alone. The government did quite the opposite, doing everything from cutting the water supply to blasting loud noises at the compound during the night. Criticism was later leveled by a local attorney, at the tactic of using sleep-and-peace-disrupting actions against the Branch Davidians. "They were trying to take someone that they viewed as unstable to start with, and they were trying to drive him crazy.," "Then they got mad 'cos he does something that they think is irrational!" (Zimmerman, 1993.)

After more than a month-long standoff, David and the FBI came to the agreement that David could finish his work decrypting the seven scrolls, but when he finished he would have to come out quietly and be arrested. But the FBI soon became restless and assumed David was just stalling. So on April 19, 1993, Janet Reno approved the use of Tear gas as a means of “smoking out” the Davidians, though at the time she claimed that all means used were non-pyrotechnic.

Pyrotechnic tear gas rounds, two metal NICO Pyrotechnic Sound & Flash grenades, and parachute illumination flares were all used to flush out the occupants of the Mount Carmel Center. After more than six hours, no Branch Davidians had exited building.
Instead, they sheltered in a concrete block room within the building and made use of gas masks.

At around noon, three fires broke out in different parts of the building and spread quickly. The strong winds aided the blaze in quickly engulfing the structure. Only nine Davidians fled the inferno. The remaining Branch Davidians, including the children, were either buried alive by rubble, suffocated by the effects of the fire, or shot. According to the FBI, Steve Schneider, Koresh’s top aide, shot and killed Koresh and then killed himself with the same gun. Truth be told nobody knows how David Koresh perished.

Many describe the Waco siege as a disaster, and few disagree. But the question remains: who was at fault? Should responsibility for the debacle that was Waco be placed at the feet of the reckless and gung-ho ATF, the ignorant and small minded FBI negotiators, or the insurgent cultists? After six years of investigations the government concluded that the Branch Davidians set fire to their own compound. But the ATF did not escape responsibility. They were reprimanded for excessive force and endangering the lives of civilians and government agents alike.

The Waco siege proved the catalyst for many conversations and was the inspiration for new laws about restricting the amount of force the government is permitted to use against civilians. Janet Reno herself apologized when it was discovered that pyrotechnics and flammable deterrents were used against American citizens in their own country. It was a small triumph only made possible because of a vast tragedy. The
men, women, and children who died can never return, but we can honor their deaths by seeking a more understanding perspective. The more we understand about each other, the better the world we live in becomes.
Bibliography


This article provided much clarity about David’s past.


I learned about the immediate consequences after the siege in this article.


This article also talked about the immediate consequences.

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This article gave me a wide overview of David’s life.


I learned much about the Mount Carmel Center itself in this article.


This taught me alot about the lives affected by the Waco Siege.

Excerpts from FRONTLINE interview with Dr. Rodney Crow, Chief of Identification Service and forensic dentist, who worked closely with Dr. Nizam Peerwani in the Waco investigation. Interview conducted August 1, 1995. (As of November 1995, Dr. Rodney Crow was still chief of ID Service.)

These excerpts told me much about investigation.
Excerpts from FRONTLINE interview with Clive Doyle, Branch Davidian, July 9, 1995 in Waco, Texas.

This interview gave me a view into who David Koresh was as a person.

Excerpts from FRONTLINE interview conducted with Sheriff Jack Harwell on August 3, 1995. (As of November 1995, Jack Harwell was still McLennan County sheriff.)

I learned much about the siege itself in this interview.

Excerpts from FRONTLINE interview with Clint Van Zandt conducted August 17, 1995 in Washington, D.C. (As of November 1995, Cliff Van Zandt was still a consultant in Fredericksburg, Virginia.)

I also learned about the siege in this interview.