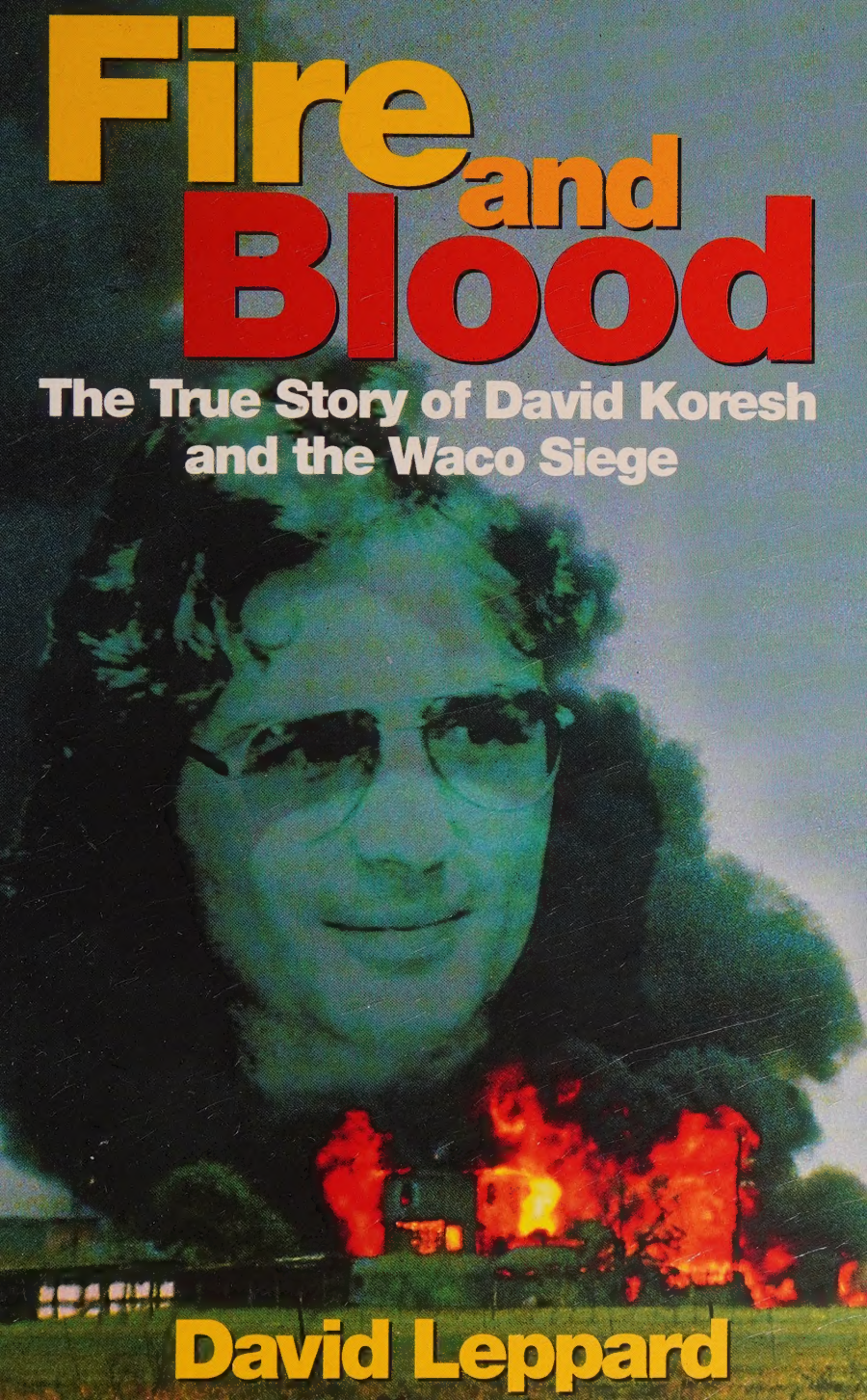
Fire and Blood

The True Story of David Koresh and the Waco Siege



David Leppard

Fire and Blood

David Leppard is the Deputy Editor of the *Sunday Times* Insight team, and formerly the newspaper's crime correspondent. He was nominated in the Reporter of the Year category of the 1989 British Press Awards. He is also the author of *On the Trail of Terror: The Inside Story of the Lockerbie Investigation* (1991) and is currently completing a book on Scotland Yard's war on terrorism.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

https://archive.org/details/firebloodtruesto0000davi

David Leppard

Fire and Blood

The True Story of David Koresh and the Waco Siege

FOURTH ESTATE : London

First published in Great Britain in 1993 by Fourth Estate Limited
289 Westbourne Grove, London W11 2QA

Copyright © 1993 by David Leppard

The right of David Leppard to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 85702 166 5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, without permission in writing from Fourth Estate Limited.

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Contents

Preface

My first debt of thanks must go to Andrew Neil, editor of the *Sunday Times*, who was extremely generous in allowing me a sabbatical to complete this book.

Sally Bell did an excellent job at very short notice in uncovering important new documentation in the Waco state court. In London, Simon Reeve was assiduous in researching the history of mass murders in America and checking other facts.

No writer on the tragedy can ignore the work of Mark England of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* and Michelle Coffey of the *Melbourne Sun Times* who first exposed events at Mount Carmel. I am also grateful to Nick Rufford, Editor of the *Sunday Times* Insight team, and Geordie Greig, the newspaper's New York correspondent, with whom I spent many hours in a Waco hotel room discussing the psychological profiling of David Koresh.

Finally, I must thank José Robinson who put up with me while I wrote this book and who made invaluable comments on the manuscript.

This book is dedicated to her.

Photographic credits

The front-cover pictures are courtesy of Associated Press.

All photographs inside the book are courtesy of Sygma and are the copyright of the following:

p.i: Rod Aydelotte

p.ii above: Elizabeth Baranyai; below: *Waco Tribune-Herald*

p.iii both pictures: *Waco Tribune-Herald*

p.iv above: Rod Aydelotte; below left: *Waco Tribune-Herald*; below right: James Tom

p.v above: Bobby Sanchez; below: KWTX-TV

p.vi above: Roy Aydelotte; below: F. Carter Smith

p.vii both pictures: Roy Aydelotte

p.viii above, and below right: Akhtar Hussein; below left: Bobby Sanchez

Part One

1

Operation Apocalypse:
The Testimony of Special Agent Davy Aguilera

The first hint of trouble came in May 1992. Larry Gilbreath, a United Parcels Service (UPS) delivery man, was loading up his van at the UPS depot in Waco, Texas, when a heavy cardboard package broke open in his hands. Inside, three boxes spilled out onto the loading-bay floor. As he bent down to retrieve the contents, Gilbreath peered at the labels and was astonished to read that the boxes contained 50 "pineapple" hand grenades. The labels indicated that the grenades were inert, but their discovery would soon prove explosive enough.

For months now, Gilbreath had been delivering similar bulky items to a remote farm complex on the outskirts of the Texan city. The delivery man liked Waco, a city of 100,000 people that sat on the buckle of the Southern Bible belt, straddling Interstate 35, two hours south of Dallas. Its citizens were deeply conservative and devoutly religious; they were proud, in the words of the City's motto, to be living "deep in the heart of Texas".

Larry Gilbreath liked the city too. The people he met there were warm-hearted and friendly. He enjoyed the short ride out on Highway 84 to the small community of Bellmead. Then it was left on Loop 340 for a couple more miles and then left again onto Farm Road number 2491, a journey just ten miles from the city centre. This was small-town America; the deep South at its very finest. Gilbreath liked the space and the freedom of his round. There was something of the spirit of the old Wild West in this backwater of the Lone Star

state. But once he was half way down the dirt single track of Farm Road, there was a subtle change. This was truly the middle of nowhere. The ever-present prairie wind often kicked up so much dust he could hardly see the ramshackle wooden homesteads and broken-down caravans which served as home for many inhabitants of this poor East Texan community.

Gilbreath knew the route well. Down 2491 for a mile and a half. Then left onto the Double EE Ranch road for a few more hundred yards until he came to two small metal buildings at the top of the drive to the New Mount Carmel Center. His suspicions had first been stirred in February 1992. The invoices on the packages showed that they contained firearms parts, accessories and various chemicals. Little surprise in that. After all, there were more than 17,000 licensed weapons dealers in Texas alone. Anyone with identification could walk into a gun shop, fill in a form, and leave with a weapon. The state's gun laws were amongst the most liberal in America. But the packages were always addressed to a strange place called "The Mag Bag", or to two men he knew only as David Koresh and Mike Schroeder. Those names seemed odd – there weren't many people of Jewish origin in this part of East Texas.

Whenever he stopped to drop off at the "Mag Bag", the delivery man was met by two other men known to him as Steve Schneider and Woodrow Kendrick. Every time Gilbreath swung by, he had to go through the same tedious ritual. He always had to wait until Schneider or Kendrick made a hushed telephone call to the compound building, telling whoever was there that he was on the way. Gilbreath would sit in his van drumming his fingers impatiently on the steering wheel waiting for Schneider to give him the nod. Then it was a short bumpy ride up the driveway towards the front of the compound, its familiar pink-ochre walls shimmering ahead in the prairie heat.

The parcels were always paid for cash on delivery. There were no cheques, and little paperwork. The two-storey

compound seemed homely enough, but something about the rambling collection of wooden and metal structures gave it an eerie feel.

On that warm Texan May morning, as Larry Gilbreath delivered his three boxes of pineapple grenades to the man at the ranch door, it finally dawned on him. As he looked up at the old watertower, standing 60 feet above the complex, he glimpsed a figure in an observation post. At a series of man-made ports in the outer walls of the wooden structure, Gilbreath noticed other figures, some of them young women. As the man at the ranch door signed the receipt, the truth struck home: he was being watched like an eagle from at least half a dozen manned observation posts. More disturbing still, the sentries appeared to be armed.

Special Agent Davy Aguilera was reading routine paperwork at his office in Austin when the call came through. On the other end of the line, 50 miles away across the flat, green pastures of mid-Texas, was Lieutenant Gene Barber of the McLennan County Sheriff's Department. Aguilera could sense the urgency in the Waco Sheriff's voice.

Barber explained that he had been contacted by a very worried Larry Gilbreath about events up at a place called Mount Carmel. Barber was an expert in explosives and Aguilera knew he was well-qualified to judge the credibility of the delivery man's story.

It appeared, said Barber, that a religious cult living in a commune on the outskirts of Waco were stockpiling enough arms, explosives and ammunition for a small army. Barber wasn't certain if they had a weapons licence. What's more, the man who led the cult was a bit of an oddball. He claimed to be Jesus Christ. Davy Aguilera drove straight over to Waco.

Aguilera was certainly the right man for the job. For the past five years he had worked as a Special Agent with the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the Texan state

capital. The Bureau – or ATF as it is known throughout America – was the branch of the United States Treasury Department responsible for enforcing the gun-licensing laws across the country. The poorer cousin to the famous Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the ATF was often the subject of ridicule. Many in the US law enforcement community saw it as second rate, dismissing it as a small agency with big ambitions. But Aguilera and his fellow Austin field-office agents shrugged off such criticism. In gun-happy America, where the majority of the 33,000 people murdered each year were killed by firearms, their work was vitally important. They saved lives.

Aguilera met Barber at the McLennan County Sheriff's Office in downtown Waco on June 4, 1992. Sheriff Barber explained that the New Mount Carmel compound was occupied by a religious sect called the Branch Davidians. The cult had more than 100 members and was tightly controlled by David Koresh. Koresh was an alias used by Vernon Wayne Howell, a man well known to the local law enforcement authorities. Howell had changed his name in 1990 because he apparently believed he was a prophet, the Messiah or the "anointed one" of God. The cult leader and his "disciples" called their compound Ranch Apocalypse, because they thought the end of the world was approaching. The man was clearly a weirdo, added Barber. The sheriff found the whole business mildly amusing. Aguilera sat transfixed as Barber recounted Gilbreath's bizarre tale about the armed sentries and the pineapple grenades. The UPS man, who was co-operating fully with the Sheriff's department, had said that a quantity of black gunpowder had also been delivered to the ranch. The ATF man made notes, thanked Lt Barber for the tip, and drove back to Austin.

Five days later, on June 9, Barber was on the phone to Aguilera again. Gilbreath had been in again, with more worrying news. He had just delivered more of those mysterious bulky packages to David Koresh and the Mount Carmel sect. This time, however, Gilbreath had taken the initiative and

made a careful note of the contents.

One parcel consisted of 90 pounds of aluminium metal and 30-40 cardboard tubes, 24 inches long and 1.25–1.5 inches wide. They came from the Fox Fire Company in Pocatella, Idaho. A second shipper, whose identity was not known, had despatched two parcels containing 60 ammunition magazines for M-16/AR-15 military-style assault rifles. These had arrived at the Mount Carmel complex on June 8.

Aguilera was alarmed. An AR-15 is a semi-automatic rifle almost identical to the M-16, the stock-in-trade of the US military. Like the M-16, the AR-15 fires .223-calibre ammunition and boasts a magazine capacity capable of firing 30–60 rounds.

The special agent knew from past experience that the purchase of these particular rounds was a tell-tale sign of something sinister. They indicated that the buyer planned to modify the perfectly legal semi-automatic AR-15 into a fully automatic, more lethal M-16. Such modification was legal, but only if the manufacturer had a licence. Aguilera had seen it before.

"I have been involved in many cases where defendants, following a relatively simple process, convert AR-15 semi-automatic rifles to fully automatic rifles of the nature of the M-16," he said later in an affidavit. "This conversion process can often be accomplished by an individual purchasing certain parts which will quickly transform the rifle to fire fully automatically. Often, templates, milling machines, lathes and instruction guides are utilized by the converter."

Koresh, in other words, appeared to have installed a production line for converting semi-automatic assault rifles into fully automatic machine-guns. The cult leader seemed to be manufacturing some of the most powerful machine-guns in America.

Aguilera learned from a confidential informant that one of Koresh's associates was Marshall Keith Butler, a machinist by trade. The records of the Texas Department of Public Safety, which controls the Texas Rangers and is responsible

for policing the state, showed that Butler was a known criminal. He had been arrested seven times since 1984 for unlawful possession of drugs and convicted twice, most recently in January 1992. Butler was now on parole. Was he the cult leader's mechanical genius, helping him to develop his arsenal?

Aguilera knew there could be only one reason why the Branch Davidian cult leader was conducting all this activity in secret: he had no licence. At that moment the ATF special agent made up his mind: Operation Apocalypse was born.

Lieutenant Barber now gave Aguilera more background information. The Mount Carmel compound occupied a sprawling patch of Texan prairie consisting of 77 acres, about the size of a city block. Surrounded by a patchwork of farms and rural homesteads, it had been occupied by Koresh and his followers for the last four years.

The property had been the scene of trouble once before. It had once been occupied by George Buchanan Roden, who had led the cult until Koresh toppled him in an almost bloodless coup. Like Koresh, Roden had also claimed to be a prophet. He also had more earthly ambitions and in 1976 had put himself forward as a candidate for the presidency of the United States.

Roden was certainly unstable. But Sheriff Barber had long believed that as long as the cult members at Mount Carmel kept themselves to themselves and kept within the law, their presence – and their religious beliefs – would be tolerated. After all, the FBI estimated there were more than 1700 religious cults in America and freedom of religion – no matter how bizarre – was guaranteed under the Constitution. The Sheriff's department had more urgent matters to consider, investigating the round of murders, sexual assaults, burglaries and traffic accidents which marked their daily beat.

Religious tolerance was especially strong in Waco, where some 100 denominations – more than anywhere else in America – flourished side by side. The city was known as the "Vatican

of the Southern Baptists". But there were a multitude of other religions too, among them the Seventh Day Adventists. Barber told Aguilera that the Mount Carmel community was an Adventist offshoot. They called themselves the Branch Davidians.

Cults, Aguilera knew, were different. Their members didn't just worship together on Sundays. They lived in communes with each other. They had rejected the American way of life, substituting in its place an alternative society based on their own idiosyncratic rules. Usually, too, they had a leader, a charismatic man or woman who preached that they were God or Christ. Cults such as the Branch Davidians attracted the lonely, the lost, the unloved and the naive. Their members came from all over but had at least one thing in common: they were alienated from modern society and were searching for a replacement. Many were society's losers with nowhere else to go. Others sought spiritual salvation and believed they would discover it by joining a cult. A few, like George Roden, were simply mad.

The Davidians could not, however, be completely ignored. By 1987 George Roden had fallen far behind with his property taxes and the local tax authorities were threatening him with foreclosure.

Apart from the taxman, Roden had a more serious problem. After an unsuccessful power struggle, Vernon Wayne Howell, also know as David Koresh, had led a breakaway group of disciples to Palestine, Texas. There, apparently jealous of Roden's power, he had plotted a military-style takeover, determined to acquire Mount Carmel by any means.

In 1987, in an action more akin to a scene from a Vietnam movie, Howell led an armed gang into Roden's ranch. In the ensuing firefight George Roden was shot and wounded. Koresh and seven others were arrested and charged with attempted murder.

At their trial in Waco the following year the jury were taken in by Howell's charismatic personality. He and the

others walked free and the Sheriff's department was forced to hand back the confiscated weapons.

Roden was returned to jail where he was serving time for calling down blasphemies on the heads of prominent Texas judges. He was now held in a mental hospital. David Koresh, the messiah of Palestine, returned in triumph to the Mount Carmel ranch. The outstanding taxes were paid. Within four years he had persuaded more than 100 people to join him there, including dozens of women and children.

It was at this point that Barber concluded his background briefing for Aguilera. The story of the pineapple grenades, the gunpowder and the machine-gun production line, together with Barber's briefing revealing the attempted murder charge, were enough for Davy Aguilera. He immediately sought and obtained permission from the ATF hierarchy in Austin to launch a full-scale investigation into Koresh and his compound. With a small team of fellow ATF agents, Aguilera now began his inquiries in earnest.

Anticipating the Bureau's interest, Sheriff Barber had asked Captain Dan Weyenberg, his Chief Deputy Sheriff, to fly discreetly over the Mount Carmel ranch and photograph it. The ATF investigators spent hours examining the black and white aerial pictures. They revealed some of the bizarre features of the L-shaped compound.

At the north end of the main structure, Weyenberg's camera had picked out what appeared to be a buried school bus. Opposite was the old watertower where the sight of sentries had first alarmed Larry Gilbreath, the UPS delivery man. The pictures clearly showed how the tower had been turned into a fortified observation post. Three or four stories tall, it had windows on all four sides, offering a 360-degree view across miles of open prairie.

Barber now put Aguilera in touch with a local resident, Robert L. Cervenka who lived at Route 7, Box 103, on the eastern side of the cult headquarters. Bob Cervenka was a long-serving and respected member of the local community

of Elk, a God-fearing and law-abiding Texan farmer who had worked his ground since 1948. Like Gilbreath, he was one of the small handful of people in regular contact with the Branch Davidians. Like many of his neighbours in the deeply conservative communities of Bellmead and Riesel, Cervenka was self-sufficient and liked to keep himself to himself. He spent his days driving a rusty old tractor across the fields, watching the cattle graze. The farmer's weather-beaten face and familiar smile were well known to the locals who met him on his rounds. But Bob Cervenka was not friendly to everyone he met: he cast a cool and disapproving eye over the "hippies" who had moved in next door.

Cervenka knew there were dozens of men, women and children living together in the religious commune next to his home. The two farms were separated by nothing more than a simple wire fence. But the Davidians' lifestyle could not have been further removed from the traditional conservative family values in which Cervenka believed. He didn't care to think too much about what went on inside those ochre-pink walls.

Events at his neighbours' farm had taken a disturbing turn in early 1992. Even Bob Cervenka couldn't ignore the noises that drifted across at night on the warm prairie wind. The staccato crackle of machine-gun fire was unmistakable. Cervenka may have been an old man, but he hadn't forgotten his tour of duty abroad with the US army. The farmer easily recognised the sound of .50-calibre machine-guns which, occasionally interspersed with the racket of M-16s, echoed across the rolling land. The noise broke into his sleep. Why should a man be firing heavy weapons in the middle of the night? He didn't like it, he told the ATF agent.

Aguilera now began tracing the origins of those mysterious parcels delivered to the "Mag Bag" by Larry Gilbreath. The Special Agent's inquiries led him to Olympia, Washington, in the far north west of America. There, Dave Haupert, manager of an arms firm called Olympia Arms Incorporated, admitted

he had indeed shipped several parcels to a man called David Koresh at the "Mag-Bag" address. Aguilera later testified: "Mr Haupert told me that the records of Olympia Arms Inc. indicated that approximately forty-five AR-15/M-16 rifle upper receiver units, with barrels of various calibres, had been shipped from March through April of 1992 to the Mag Bag Corporation for a total cost of $11,107.31, cash on delivery." Haupert had no idea what the "Mag Bag Corporation" was.

On that same day, June 8, Aguilera also telephoned Glen Deruiter, the manager of Sarco Inc., an arms company based in Stirling, New Jersey. Deruiter said that in May 1992 he had shipped an M-16 parts kit, together with an arm sling and magazine, to David Koresh at the Mag Bag address. The invoice for $284.95 had been paid cash on delivery.

The two arms firms were 3,000 miles apart, at opposite ends of the American continent. Aguilera saw that there might be method in the cult leader's apparent madness. By spreading his orders so wide, Koresh would avoid any single ATF field office detecting a pattern in his deadly purchases. Aguilera's hunch would shortly be confirmed.

In an interview with Cythnia Aleo, owner and manager of the Nesard Gun Parts company in Barrington, Illinois, Aguilera learned that she had despatched two M-16 machine-gun "car" kits and two M-16 EZ kits to Mount Carmel. The kits, delivered to the Mag Bag in May, contained all the parts for making an M-16 machine-gun, except for the lower receiver unit. By law, it was the lower receivers which comprised the actual "firearm". Aleo told Aguilera that Koresh had paid $1,227.00 for her goods, again cash on delivery.

Aguilera discovered from Curtis Bartlett, an ATF Firearms Technician, that the Nesard company was under investigation by Bureau agents for allegedly supplying gun parts for the construction of unlicensed weapons. Aguilera now ran a check on Koresh and his associates using the computer at the United States Firearms Database in Washington DC. The National Firearms Registration and Transfer Record showed

no trace of any machine-guns or other firearms registered to Howell or Paul Fatta, a close follower who Aguilera believed might be the cult's main weapons buyer. The Firearms Licensing Section of the ATF in Atlanta, Georgia, also showed no record that Howell, Fatta, or the mysterious "Mag-Bag Corporation" were listed as registered firearms dealers or manufacturers.

Aguilera was taking no chances. He ran a third check, also on the ATF Atlanta database, to see whether David Koresh, Howell's recently acquired alias, or David M. Jones, whom he had learnt was the cult leader's second-in-command, were licensed as arms dealers or manufacturers. Once again, the computer search was negative.

By the end of June 1992 Davy Aguilera had drawn up a comprehensive list of the firearms and explosives which had been ordered by Koresh and other Mount Carmel residents that year. The list was impressive. It included:

104 AR-15/M-16 upper receiver groups with barrels;
8,100 rounds of 9mm and .223-calibre ammunition for the guns;
20 100-round capacity drum magazines for AK-47 assault rifles;
30 M-14 magazines;
200 practice M-31 rifle grenades;
two flare launchers;
three cases (50) of inert hand grenades;
several M-16 machine-gun kits;
40–50 pounds of gunpowder;
30 pounds of potassium nitrate;
five pounds of magnesium metal powder;
one pound of igniter cord (a class C explosive);
91 AR-15 lower receiver units;
26 hand and long guns of various calibres and brands;
90 pounds of aluminium powder;
30–40 cardboard tubes.

The total cost of this small armoury amounted, Aguilera estimated, to about $200,000. Where was David Koresh, a man who claimed to eschew material values, getting his money? And what, more worryingly, was he planning to do with his weapons?

On November 13 Aguilera interviewed Terry Fuller, one of Barber's colleagues and another Deputy Sheriff at McLennan County. Fuller had been on routine patrol up near the Mount Carmel compound the previous week when, at about 1.25 pm, he had heard a loud explosion. As the Waco officer approached the ranch he could see a large pall of black smoke rising from the north end of the building. Either this was some sort of accident, which Koresh failed to report, or he was testing home-made bombs.

By the year's end Special Agent Davy Aguilera had built up a disturbing picture of the cult leader's military stockpile. But Operation Apocalypse was now about to uncover even more alarming evidence.

2

Building for Armageddon

"And they assembled them at the place which is called in Hebrew Armageddon" – Revelations 16:26

"Armageddon: The great symbolical battlefield, scene of the final struggle between the powers of good and evil" – Collins English Dictionary

In December 1992, Special Agent Davy Aguilera stumbled across Mount Carmel's most horrifying secret. The discovery would lend fresh impetus to his investigation and later prove a critical factor in influencing the decision-making process in Washington. For what had started as a routine inquiry into a breach of federal firearms regulations was transformed overnight into a wide-ranging probe into child abuse and macabre sexual ritual.

The evidence Aguilera now began to uncover would spark bitter debate. The President of the United States would use it to justify actions which would later lead to the deaths of more than 80 people. It would be used, too, by many critics of the Waco operation as proof that some of the most senior politicians in the land were involved in covering up their culpability for the tragedy that was about to unfold.

On December 7, Aguilera spoke to Carlos Torres, a fellow ATF Special Agent on the Waco inquiry team. Torres recounted a disquieting interview he had had three days before with Joyce Sparks, a child protection officer from the Texas Department of Human Services in Waco.

Sparks had received a complaint from an unnamed party outside Texas that David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians, was operating a "commune-type compound" and sexually abusing young girls.

In a bid to investigate the allegations Sparks had visited the compound on February 27, 1992 with two colleagues and two deputies from Sheriff Barber's department. The delegation was met at the Mount Carmel door by a woman who identified herself as Rachel Koresh, wife of David Koresh. Sparks noted that around Rachel's neck was a pendant in the shape of the Star of David. She later learned that this symbolised Rachel's marriage to the cult leader.

Rachel Koresh appeared nervous and was at first unwilling to talk to the inquiry team. She was under strict instructions, she explained, not to speak to anybody unless her husband was present. Unfortunately, her husband, the Davidians' leader, was not at the ranch. He would not be back for some time.

Sparks was persistent and Rachel Koresh eventually agreed to allow the delegation inside. As they stood in the main foyer Sparks managed to persuade Rachel to let her talk to some of the young children who were running around. The cult children gave the impression of being happy and carefree, but when Sparks began to talk to one eight-year-old boy, that initial picture of communal bliss began to dissolve. The boy said he couldn't wait to grow up and be a man. When Sparks asked him why, the eight-year-old replied that when he became an adult he would get a "long gun", just like the other men. All the adults had guns, he said. They practised weapons training with them.

Sparks observed a lot of construction work going on at the site. She noticed that underground tunnels and bunkers were being dug. Special ports seemed to have been created in the compound walls. There were, she later reported, some 70 people inside. The residents included fifteen to twenty adult men, most of whom were building a new chapel. The women were cooking or cleaning and carrying out other domestic

duties. After a short time, Rachel Koresh grew agitated and it became obvious that Sparks and her colleagues were not welcome. They were soon asked to leave.

Joyce Sparks was not happy with what she had seen and on April 6 arranged to return to the compound for a second visit. This time she met David Koresh. Almost as soon as she had entered the compound, the child protection officer took the opportunity to ask the Branch Davidian leader about the weapons training mentioned by the young boy.

Koresh seemed calm and collected. He explained that there were indeed weapons at the ranch. But they were few in number and most of the adults knew nothing of them. Sparks pressed Koresh, asking to see them. The cult leader told her to wait 30 minutes while he got the other residents to leave the building. He was concerned that they would otherwise know where the firearms were stored.

Koresh invited Sparks on a guided tour of the property. As they walked round, Sparks noted there had been more construction since her first trip. More tunnels had been dug, more ports made in the walls. When she repeated her questions about the weaponry, Koresh replied curtly: "They're in a safe place." Then he changed the subject.

The child protection officer did, though, get to see the buried school bus. Half-way through the tour Sparks spotted a trap door. It was built into the floor of a room at the northern end of the building. When Sparks asked to look underneath, Koresh, polite and relaxed, agreed to open it. As she peered into the gloom, Sparks could make out a ladder leading down into the school bus. She went down a few steps and, with the aid of a torch (there was no power supply to the bus), she strained her eyes to see further into the vehicle. She was astonished to see that all the seats had been removed. At the far end there was a large refrigerator peppered with dozens of holes. She quickly realised they were bullet holes. Scattered on the floor near the fridge, she spotted three long guns.

Once more, Sparks quizzed David Koresh. Once more, the Branch Davidian leader, charming and plausible as ever, replied matter-of-factly that this was where he practised his target shooting. He didn't want to disturb the neighbours. Old Bob Cervenka would have been interested to hear that.

By now Sparks was certain the tour had been stage-managed for her. She had had to make an appointment to visit the ranch and Koresh had known she was coming. As they returned to the foyer by the front door, the social worker issued a final challenge to Koresh to give her direct access to the children. Koresh turned her down, claiming without explanation that they were not available.

The conversation then turned to Koresh himself. He was, he said, a "messenger" from God. The world was coming to an end. When he finally "revealed" himself, the riots in Los Angeles would pale in comparison to what was going to happen in Waco. Fifty-three people had been killed in the outbreak of violence that had followed the acquittal of four Los Angeles policemen for the beating of Rodney King, a black motorist. The savagery of the rioting had shocked America.

Koresh elaborated. It would be a "military-type operation" and all the "non-believers" would suffer. That afternoon, a chilled Sparks returned to her home in Waco. Something evil was happening at Mount Carmel. She didn't know it yet, but she had witnessed the first public intimations of David Koresh's apocalypse.

A picture of life on the Mount Carmel compound slowly began to emerge. On December 11, 1992, four days after hearing of Sparks' two trips to Ranch Apocalypse, Davy Aguilera flew to La Verne, California. With its tree-lined avenues, grand old houses, town square and quaint university campus, La Verne looked like a Norman Rockwell painting with a few palm trees added in. Aguilera had gone there to interview Robyn Bunds, a former Branch Davidian and Mount Carmel resident.

Robyn Bunds' evidence would prove a turning point in the widening ATF inquiry. She provided the federal authorities with the first hard evidence about the cult leader's freakish psychological make-up and his aberrant sexual tastes.

Bunds explained that, three years earlier, at the age of nineteen, she had given birth to Shaun, an illegitimate son fathered by David Koresh. Bunds said she was frightened about the prospect of reprisals, but she felt sure the authorities should know how dangerous Koresh really was. She was prepared to co-operate and give a sworn statement, provided the ATF could guarantee her police protection. Eager to protect a potential key witness, Aguilera agreed.

Bunds said that she had known Koresh since 1984 and had gone to live at the Mount Carmel compound in 1988 aged eighteen. She had once genuinely believed that Koresh was indeed a prophet and the new Messiah, and had taken rapidly to his faith.

It was not long before she fell in love with the cult leader. Soon they were sleeping together. The following year she gave birth to a son, Wisdom, later renamed Shaun. But she would soon fall out with Koresh, who had taken other women. A disillusioned Robyn Bunds eventually left the commune in 1990 after realising that the sect leader had lost interest in her and was becoming progressively more violent and abusive towards her and other residents.

Bunds painted an alarming picture of life on the ranch. During her two-year stay there, Koresh made her and the other residents watch violent Vietnam war films over and over again. He told his "disciples" that the films, including *Hamburger Hill* (which has graphic slow-motion shots of American soldiers being shot to pulp by enemy machine-guns), *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, were "training" films.

According to Bunds, Koresh instructed residents to stand guard with loaded weapons 24 hours a day. The idea, it appeared, was to turn his followers into paranoid zombies and to prepare them for the final confrontation. He had said

that the sect members were "God's Marines". One cult member had summed it up thus: "If you can't die for God; you can't live for God."

Koresh himself always kept a gun at his side; Robyn told Aguilera that the cult leader kept one under his bed while sleeping.

The house at 2707 White Avenue, in La Verne, had originally belonged to Robyn Bunds' parents, Jeannine and Donald. They too had been cult members. Such was the cult leader's influence over the family that he had obtained exclusive control over their property. He had even made Don and Jeannine buy another property which served as a temporary home for cult members to stay in whenever they were on the West Coast. Only much later, as he prepared for his final showdown with the authorities, did Koresh accept that he no longer required either house and relinquished control of them to their rightful owners. Koresh turned the place on White Avenue into a commune. One room, reserved for the exclusive use of the cult leader and the woman of his choice, had one bed only. The rest of the house was like a dormitory, with bunk beds in each bedroom.

The White Avenue house was where female cult members stayed when they travelled to California. The second house, at 178 East Arrow, Pomona, California, was for the men. The two houses were satellites of the main cult headquarters in Texas.

When Koresh travelled the 1,600 miles from Waco to California he always chose to stay with the women at White Avenue. If he was there on a Saturday, a holy day to Branch Davidians and Seventh Day Adventists alike, Koresh would hold a Sabbath service at the house. He would deliver his sermons to the women upstairs while the men, over from the Pomona house, gathered downstairs.

Koresh knew that in the absence of the men, he could cast a more effective spell over the women. When detectives from La Verne police raided the house in 1990, they found Koresh

upstairs with twenty women. "He was there by himself with all the women," said Detective Ron Ingels. "And the women indicated they were dedicated and loyal to him and would do anything he said."

Robyn Bunds had spent a lot of time at the La Verne house. After Shaun was born, Bunds and Koresh grew apart. One day Bunds told the cult leader she wanted to return to a normal life. Koresh asked her what she would do. Bunds suggested she might go to see an old boyfriend. The jealous cult leader stormed off.

The following day Bunds returned to the house from her job as a receptionist for a local video-copying firm. All her belongings were gone. So was Shaun. Koresh had sent him back to Mount Carmel accompanied by Novelette Sinclair, who baby-sat for Shaun while Robyn worked. Bunds was furious. She went straight to the police.

The La Verne detectives went to White Avenue and confronted David Koresh. They gave the cult leader 48 hours to bring Shaun back, otherwise they were going to charge him with kidnapping. They also threatened to tell the media. Koresh was dumbstruck, he was shaking. The presence of the police undermined him totally. It showed he was no longer in control. He couldn't believe the betrayal. The cult leader spent the next few days walking around like a zombie. "She stuck a knife in my heart and twisted it," Koresh said to the others. Shaun was back two days later. Koresh, though, never returned to La Verne. "I don't think he liked our attention," said Detective Ingels.

The two California satellite homes also became the site of additional armouries. In June 1992, while Robyn Bunds was cleaning one of the bedrooms, she uncovered a plastic bag full of gun parts. Robyn's brother David knew a little about firearms. He told her the parts were components for a machine-gun conversion kit. Robyn hastily packed them away and put them in the garage. She knew Koresh would send for them. Shortly afterwards, Paul Fatta, Jimmy Riddle and Neal

Vaega, three of Koresh's closest lieutenants, arrived from Waco and took the machine-gun kit away.

When the White Avenue address was later searched by agents from the ATF's Long Beach, California field office, its garage was found to contain a small bomb factory. Inside, agents discovered paraphernalia for making improvised explosives including sulphuric and nitric acid, baking soda and sawdust mixed with aluminium powder. The house itself contained correspondence to and from the Waco compound. There were twenty cassette tapes which showed, in the words of one ATF agent, a "predisposition to violence".

Davy Aguilera saw Robyn's mother on December 12. Like her daughter, Jeannine Bunds had spent a lot of time at Mount Carmel. Her presence illustrated how Koresh could hold sway over whole families, exercising a seemingly magical power over even the most mature of cult members. Jeannine's husband, Donald, was a devoted Koresh disciple who was to stay on even after his wife and daughter left.

Like Robyn, Jeannine Bunds had fallen under the cult leader's influence. She was utterly bewitched by his charm. She was flattered by his apparent favour. "I wanted to be in the House of David," she explained later. "He made it sound so wonderful. I *did*. I did believe. I couldn't tell you why now."

Jeannine Bunds found the cult leader's attentions intoxicating. He told her he had the power to make her pregnant, even though she was in her early fifties. She believed every word. But Jeannine eventually fell out with Koresh; too, especially after she discovered that his attentions towards her might have something to do with the two houses she owned on the West Coast. She left Ranch Apocalypse in September 1991, returning to a job as a registered nurse at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. Later she got the two California houses back.

Jeannine Bunds may have belonged to the caring profession, but the charismatic Koresh soon ensnared her in his

grip, encouraging her to take part in live firing exercises. Jeannine recalled seeing several AK-47 assault-type rifles. She told Aguilera that in July 1991 she saw Koresh shooting a machine-gun at the back of the ranch. "She knew it was a machine-gun," Aguilera said in an affidavit to support his application for a search warrant for Mount Carmel, "because it functioned with a very rapid fire and would tear up the ground when Koresh shot it."

Jeannine described Koresh's intimate involvement with the women on the compound. The cult leader had fathered at least fifteen children by several of the women and young girls at the compound. Bunds knew this was true. As a nurse, she had acted as the sect's midwife, personally delivering seven of the children. Some of the girls Koresh had slept with had given birth when they were just twelve. It was a side of Koresh that the cult leader and his lawyer Dick DeGuerin, would consistently deny. But, as Aguilera was beginning to discover, the evidence to support it was overwhelming.

According to Jeannine Bunds, Koresh annulled the marriages of all the couples who joined his cult. This gave him exclusive sexual access to the women. Apart from fathering children, he also had frequent sexual intercourse with several of the young girls there. Their ages varied from eleven years to those in their late teens.

The child-sex claim gelled with what Robyn Bunds had told La Verne police two years earlier while trying to get her son Shaun back. Robyn had claimed that Koresh was having sex with a fourteen-year-old Australian girl who had become a "wife" a year earlier. When Detective Ingels tried to find the girl at the White Avenue house, he discovered that Koresh had taken her back with him to Waco.

By early 1993, Aguilera's inquiries were producing further corroboration of the emerging sexual abuse allegations. On January 1 and again on January 3 Bill Buford, an ATF Agent in charge of the Bureau's Little Rock, Arkansas office, carried out two tape-recorded interviews with Mrs Poia Vaega,

the wife of one of the cult leader's lieutenants. The Vaegas were now back at their home in Mangere, near Auckland, New Zealand.

Poia Vaega told Agent Buford that she had been kept at the Mount Carmel ranch against her will for a period of three and a half months from June 1991. During that time, Poia alleged, her sister, Doreen Saipaia, had been subjected to sustained physical and sexual abuse. "The physical and sexual abuse was done by Vernon Wayne Howell [Koresh] and Stanley Sylvia, a close follower of Howell, on several occasions," Vaega told the ATF.

Vaega had been to the Waco compound before, for a short period in March 1990 when she had stayed there with her husband Leslie. The couple had immediately been separated upon their arrival. They were not allowed to sleep together or have any sexual contact. Like Bunds, Vaega confirmed that all the girls and women in Mount Carmel were reserved solely for Koresh. The rest of the male cult members were kept in separate quarters, sleeping in bunk beds four to a room. At night they were restricted to their rooms on the ground floor at the northern end of the complex.

While his male followers were expected to remain celibate, Koresh himself could pick and choose from among the women. He made sure they all slept apart from the men, upstairs on the first floor. The area soon became a sexual playground for the predatory cult leader.

Joyce Sparks, the investigation supervisor at the Department of Human Services in Waco, had also been busy trying to track down former cult members in search of proof of the child-abuse allegations.

By early 1993 Sparks had obtained a disturbing statement from a former female cultist who had gone to live in the Branch Davidian compound at the age of three when her mother had moved there. The teenager, whom Sparks agreed not to identify, claimed that when she was just ten years old, her mother drove her from Mount Carmel to a seedy motel

room in Waco. The girl's account – as reported to Sparks – was compelling:

> David Koresh was waiting for her in bed with no pants on. She stated that, while in the motel room, Howell sexually molested her. When asked how she was feeling when this happened, she responded "scared" but "privileged".
>
> She was asked if she knew what was going to happen to her when she was left in the hotel room by her mother. She said that she knew it would happen "one of those times". She explained that they didn't talk about this because they didn't have to. It was understood in the group that this is what happens. They did not need to talk about it. That was just the way it was and everyone knew it.
>
> It was asked if she knew about any other girls who had experienced this and she said yes ... She reported that she knew about Michele Jones. When asked how she knew this, she explained that Howell had talked about having sex with Michele when she was fourteen. He told in a Bible Study once what it was like when he had sex with Michele.

Aguilera felt sick when he heard the story. The child abuse allegations, together with the emerging picture of Koresh's predatory sexual tastes, convinced the ATF special agent that the Branch Davidian leader would only be safe if he was behind bars. David Koresh, however, was no ordinary paedophile. He had already decided he wasn't going to make things that easy.

The disclosure of child abuse at Mount Carmel shocked the ATF inquiry team at Austin. It seemed to give their inquiry a moral bedrock. Now, as the New Year came in, Aguilera's supervisors agreed to give him even more resources. Over the next weeks Aguilera stepped up his covert surveillance of the Koresh ranch. Cult members, including Koresh, were discreetly followed into Waco where they were seen stockpiling

large quantities of food and other essential supplies.The ranch telephone was monitored. The registration numbers of several vehicles, including a vintage Ford Camaro parked in the grounds, were traced. They belonged to David Koresh.

For the ATF the most valuable source of inside information about the Branch Davidians lay in the testimony of former cult members. By the end of the Waco operation, federal authorities including the ATF and the FBI would have traced and interviewed more than 60 former residents. Their stories provide a frightening but comprehensive overview of Koresh and his mission.

Marc Breault, a computer programmer based in Australia, was to prove one of Aguilera's most important witnesses. He was interviewed in Los Angeles, California, on January 8. The ATF wanted to know whether Koresh would surrender peacefully. Breault told them no. Koresh was the sort of pathological criminal who would never give up without a fight. Breault also told them a lot more.

Breault was an American citizen who had gone to live in Melbourne with his Australian-born wife Elizabeth. In early 1988 he had gone to stay at the Mount Carmel compound where he quickly became one of Koresh's most trusted confidants. He had also stayed for months at one of the cult's California homes. He had finally left the cult in September 1989, in disgust at the cult leader's behaviour and fearful of a future tragedy.

The ex-cult member was in a unique position to provide first-hand intelligence about Koresh. He helped explain how the image of the Branch Davidian leader had changed from that of the kindly father figure who had led his people out of the wilderness to their rightful home in 1988, to that of a ruthless, paranoid killer hell-bent on achieving the cult's self-destruction.

Koresh and Dick DeGuerin, his lawyer, would later dismiss Breault's claims as the delusions of a disgruntled rival. But the former cult member's testimony has been accepted in

court as reliable. His revelations about life at Ranch Apocalypse have been corroborated by the evidence of many others.

Breault told the ATF agent that he and other men and women residents had undergone gruelling physical training and taken part in live firearms exercises conducted by Koresh. He described how he had stood for hours at a time, brandishing a loaded automatic machine-gun. "Guard duty was maintained twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week," he told Aguilera. "Those who stood guard were instructed by Howell to 'shoot to kill' anyone who attempted to come through the entrance gate of the Mount Carmel property."

Koresh believed that after his 1988 trial, in which he had been cleared of the attempted murder of George Roden, either Roden or the authorities would seek their revenge. Roden himself might try to regain control over the sect. He was mad enough to do anything.

It was with defence in mind that Koresh had first formed his own praetorian guard, the Mighty Men. (In the Old Testament, the Mighty Men were a group of select warriors who fought for King David.) At Mount Carmel, their duty was to give everything, including their lives and their wives, for their leader. During the day they did guard duty, underwent firearms drill and fortified the building. At night, they slept with their guns by their beds. By early 1993, Koresh had appointed twenty Mighty Men, among them Jaime Castillo, Clive Doyle, Floyd Houtman, David Jones, Douglas Martin, Phillip and Stephen Henry, James Riddle, Steve Schneider, Livingston Malcolm and David Thibodeaux. Their combined firepower represented the core of the cult's military strength.

On one occasion, Koresh confided to Breault that he wanted to obtain or manufacture machine-guns, hand grenades and bombs. The cult leader said he was contemptuous of America's gun-control laws. Anybody could go out and buy a firearm. The same individual could legally purchase the accessories needed to turn the firearm into a machine-gun. Yet the act of putting the firearm and the required parts together was

illegal. The law was an ass; and because it was an ass Koresh intended to exploit it.

Koresh told Breault he needed a copy of *The Anarchist's Cook Book*. This was a 1960s' underground manual for would-be revolutionaries, a sort of do-it-yourself guide to manufacturing home-made bombs. In some parts of America possession of it was a criminal offence.

More recent evidence of Koresh's growing obsession with weapons was supplied by David Block, a former cult member from Los Angeles. Aguilera saw him on January 25, 1993. Block had lived inside the Waco compound from March until mid-June 1992. His first-hand knowledge of the newly installed machine-gun manufacturing line was so detailed and alarming it stunned the ATF. His powerful testimony put the final lie to those who claimed that David Koresh was essentially a peace-loving religious leader who had been unfairly persecuted by the authorities.

Block recalled travelling to two gun shows in Houston and San Antonio with Koresh, Mike Schroeder, Paul Fatta and a licensed gun dealer called Henry McMahon. Schroeder and Fatta were the cult's official weapons buyers. McMahon was its unofficial advisor.

Koresh bought a metal lathe and a metal-milling machine. Then, with the aid of sophisticated computer technology, he set about trying to become self-sufficient in producing machine-guns. The lathe and milling machine were operated by Jeff Little, one of the cult leader's lieutenants, and Donald Bunds, the husband of Jeannine, nurse and midwife to the cult's babies.

Donald Bunds was a mechanical engineer who had sufficient expertise to fabricate gun parts. Block had seen him designing a "grease gun" or "sten gun" (following the design of the small automatic gun used by British troops in the Second World War) on a three-dimensional Computer Aided Display (CAD) screen. David Block had once looked over Bunds' shoulder. On the monitor he could see a graphic

outline of a cylinder-shaped tube. Inside the tube a slot had been drawn to act as a bolt lever to cock the gun. Explaining the CAD design, Bunds told Block that Koresh had asked him to design a "grease gun" which could then be manufactured at the compound. Later Bunds began designing a template to fit over and around the gun tubes. The computer graphic of the template illustrated where the bolt lever slots should be milled out on the machine.

Block's testimony went some way towards corroborating the earlier eyewitness evidence from Larry Gilbreath (the UPS delivery man). Block told Aguilera he had repeatedly heard Koresh ask cult followers if anyone had any knowledge of making machine-guns or knew how to convert semi-automatic weapons to fully automatic assault rifles.

In one discussion Block heard Koresh talking about a shipment of inert hand grenades. The cult leader boasted to followers about his plans to reactivate them, using black powder and fuses. No-one mentioned that reactivating and re-arming inert hand grenades is prohibited under American law.

There was much talk, too, of *The Anarchist's Cook Book*. Weapons-related publications such as *Shotgun News* and "other related clandestine magazines" were scattered across tables in the compound.

Block also recalled seeing several big guns, including a .50-calibre bi-pod mounted rifle. Aguilera deduced from the description that it was a British-made .52 "British Boys" anti-tank rifle. Block noted that James Jones, from Redding, California, had visited the Mount Carmel Center in April or May 1992. Jones was well-known to the ATF as a firearms and explosives expert.

Other former cult members revealed more alarming details about the arms build-up. One told Earl Dunagan, an ATF Special Agent, that he had seen "two or three illegal firearm silencers being manufactured in the compound". The silencers were for AR-15 rifles. Another spoke of gas masks, radio equipment, police scanners, and tactical vests for

carrying arms and munitions. The cult members also had spotting scopes, binoculars and night-vision equipment. Residents had a store of mobile phones which they used to communicate with each other. A third ATF source spoke of Koresh buying parts to build radio-controlled aircraft. The source claimed he intended to adapt them so they could deliver flying bombs.

There was one more important element in the criminal case the ATF was compiling against David Koresh. In preparation for a possible raid, ATF Intelligence directors had asked Aguilera to identify every single member of the commune. Through the database of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS), the ATF inquiry team learned that at least 40 cult members were foreign nationals. They had all given the address of the Waco compound as a contact point when entering America. These 40 comprised a large number from the United Kingdom, and others from Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica and Israel.

INS records showed that most of these "aliens" had overstayed the expiry date of their entry permits or visas and were thus living illegally in America. That offence alone was sufficient to deport them, a move which would effectively deprive Koresh of half his followers and much of his source of income. But for the ATF there was a more relevant breach of the law. Under Title 18 of the United States Code, section 922, it is a criminal offence for illegal aliens to receive or carry firearms.

By mid-February Davy Aguilera had acquired a substantial dossier on the criminal community at Mount Carmel. The dossier pointed to Koresh's violation of federal firearms laws, his participation in child abuse and sexual relations with underage girls. The cult leader was also sheltering more than three dozen illegal aliens, many of them in possession of firearms.

For fear of tipping Koresh off, Aguilera had carefully refrained from interviewing former cult members until the last

three months of his lengthy inquiry. Now he saw that their testimony was remarkably consistent in its own right. It also seemed to mesh with everything he had learned from other non-cult witnesses such as Gilbreath, Cervenka, Sparks and Sparks' unidentified informant who claimed to have been sexually abused by Koresh in the Waco motel room.

By any standards, Aguilera had a solid case to apply for a search warrant for Mount Carmel and to arrest Koresh. But he had one more important investigative tool up his sleeve. His name was Bob Rodriguez.

ATF Special Agent Robert Rodriguez was given the task by Aguilera of posing as a potential cult member and infiltrating the compound. Such undercover operations are often sanctioned by US law enforcement agencies such as the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). They are, of course, high risk and manpower intensive. But if properly targeted and supervised they can uncover vital evidence which can make the difference between a successful prosecution and jury acquittal. The ATF was no exception.

The ATF field office in Austin knew that Koresh had already bamboozled a jury once with his cunning and charm, in 1988. Then, the prosecution case had balanced on a knife edge; Koresh's persuasive and plausible personality had helped push it in his favour. Now, though, the federal authorities were taking no chances.

It is unclear exactly how or when Rodriguez inveigled himself into David Koresh's confidence. Indeed there are those who claim he never did. Catherine Matteson, a long-standing cult member who left the compound after the ATF raid, claimed Koresh knew Rodriguez was an undercover agent. Matteson, like many cult members, ascribed astonishing powers of perception to her beloved leader, claiming he had seen through the ATF agent's cover immediately.

Whatever the truth, it was clear that David Koresh found

Rodriguez sufficiently interesting to contact him on February 21, just a week before the fateful raid, and invite him into Mount Carmel.

When the undercover ATF agent arrived, Rodriguez found himself treated to a typical Koresh reception. For half an hour, the cult leader, a failed rock musician, entertained the ATF undercover man with his own peculiar blend of guitar music. Afterwards, he began reading long excerpts from the Bible. During the session Koresh bombarded Rodriguez with dozens of questions about his life. This may well have been a bizarre way of interrogating the ATF agent, but at the end of the session, Rodriguez was invited to attend a two-week Bible study course with Koresh.

The idea, the cult leader explained, was to learn the Seven Seals, the apocalyptic creed of the Book of Revelations which formed the backbone of the Branch Davidians' faith. Only then could Rodriguez be accepted into the Mount Carmel community.

Koresh also expounded his views on two subjects close to his heart: taxes and guns. He warned Rodriguez that as a Branch Davidian member he would become an outcast. The government did not consider the Davidians a genuine religion and were particularly upset because Koresh had recently been refusing to pay federal, state or local taxes.

There was certainly a messianic edge to the cult leader's beliefs on guns. He held as axiomatic the right to bear arms. He would resist to the end the government's efforts to take that right away. Koresh claimed it was the Bible that gave him the right to carry weapons. He repeated his view that the gun laws were ridiculous; particularly those which banned the construction of fully automatic machine-guns when the parts themselves could be bought legally.

Koresh proceeded to illustrate his contempt for the ATF by showing Rodriguez a video made by the Gun Owners Association of America (GOA). The video's commentary was a bitter polemic against America's gun laws. The Association

claimed that the ATF regularly violated gun owners' rights and subjected them to threats and lies. Koresh's attitude towards the ATF was later summed up by one expert who advised the FBI during the Waco siege: "I think Koresh clearly regarded them as satanic and evil." Rodriguez left the compound to report to his superiors.

By February 25, 1993, Special Agent Davy Aguilera knew he had enough evidence for a search and arrest warrant. "I believe that Vernon Howell, also known as David Koresh and/or his followers who reside at the compound known locally as the Mount Carmel Center, are unlawfully manufacturing and possessing machine-guns and explosive devices," he wrote in his nineteen-page affidavit. In a final paragraph he explained why he needed the search warrant:

> It is my belief ... that it is a common practice for persons engaged in the unlawful manufacture and possession of machine-guns and explosive devices to employ surreptitious methods and means to acquire the products necessary to produce such items, and the production, use and storage of those items are usually in a protected or secret environment. It is also my experience that persons who acquire firearms, firearm parts and explosive materials maintain records of receipt and ownership of such items and instruction manuals or other documents explaining the methods of construction of such unlawful weaponry.

Appending a detailed description of the buildings and land to be searched, Davy Aguilera took his typed affidavit to Dennis Green, the United States magistrate for the Western District of Texas.

Green read the fifteen pages with his usual judicious care. The case was overwhelming. It wasn't long before the judge scrawled his looping signature at the bottom of search warrant No. W93-15m. The only restraint he made was to cross out a clause in the warrant which would have authorised a

night-time raid.

The judge also signed the arrest warrant in the case of the United States of America vs Vernon Wayne Howell, aka David Koresh. The warrant, addressed to The United States Marshal and Any Authorised United States Officer, ordered: "You are hereby commanded to arrest Vernon Wayne Howell and bring him forthwith to the nearest magistrate to answer a complaint charging him with unlawful possession of a destructive device in violation of Title 26 United States Code section 5845 (f)."

Aguilera was delighted. Eight months of intensive inquiries had finally borne fruit. The ATF Special Operations task force was now set to go.

3

Shoot-Out at Mount Carmel

The authorities rehearsed long and hard for the showdown with David Koresh. The problem was, they appeared to have made little secret of it.

Even before Aguilera had set in motion Operation Apocalypse, the local law enforcement authorities had unwittingly tipped-off the Branch Davidians about their possible future intentions. For four days in early March 1992, the Waco police department had repeatedly stormed a vacant house just 500 yards from the "Mag Bag" as part of training exercises in SAS-style hostage rescue operations. Ostensibly, the local police were simply practising how to execute search and arrest warrants in dangerous situations. But to Koresh, watching the assaults through his binoculars from the Mount Carmel watertower, the exercise seemed an unwarranted provocation.

The cult leader later told Henry McMahon, a local firearms dealer and confidant, that he had seen an "ATF SWAT Team" training next door. Koresh claimed the exercise was a show of force by the federal lawmakers, an ill-disguised signal of the ATF's intention to storm the Mount Carmel compound one day. An agency document noted: "Howell had stated to McMahon that ATF is so arrogant that they are conducting their training right in front of us because the ATF wants to send us a message of what they're going to do to cult members."

Koresh may have been wrong about the SWAT exercises. They were in fact routine practice by the local police depart-

ment and had nothing to do with the ATF. But his judgement, that when the Bureau finally turned up at the compound they would be well prepared, could not be faulted. The ATF was taking no chances. Even as the ink of Judge Green's signatures on the search and arrest warrants was drying, Davy Aguilera had sent word back to Austin that the contingency plan for the arrest be activated. With probable cause for apprehending Koresh established, agents from three of the Bureau's 21 field offices in Houston, Dallas and New Orleans were mobilised. The compound was to be attacked from the ground and the air. In anticipation of the raid going ahead, several ATF units had arrived in Waco the previous week to carry out intensive training at nearby Fort Hood.

At the Bureau's headquarters in Washington DC, Steven Higgins, the ATF Director, carefully considered the Waco plan. Higgins was not one of the bright lights of Washington, but he had a reputation for overseeing his government domain with quiet efficiency. A methodical, publicity-shy civil servant, he was not the sort of person to make rash decisions when it came to operations involving the lives of his agents.

The 54-year-old ATF Director led a happy domestic life. His son was about to graduate from college. Both his daughters were expecting. At his office in Massachusetts Avenue, Washington, the slim, grey-haired bureaucrat supervised inquiries into everything from bootleg whiskey distilleries to the manufacture of home-made bombs. He ate lunch at McDonald's. In the evenings and at weekends he liked to jog near his home in Fairfax County, Virginia, south of Washington.

Stephen Higgins had been at the helm for ten years now. When he first became director in 1983, the ATF had been deep in the doldrums. President Ronald Reagan had openly called it a "rogue agency", after a series of public disasters that had nearly ended its short life. That year, the National Rifle Association, representing Americans' self-proclaimed right to carry firearms, had released a video describing the agency

as a "jackbooted group of fascists who are ... a shame and a disgrace to our country".

Higgins had spent the last decade rebuilding the ATF. A career ATF official, he had started life as an inspector of firearms and alcohol records in Omaha. Thirty-two years later he found himself in charge of an agency with 4,300 employees and a budget of nearly $400m. Higgins figured that wasn't bad for an organisation that could trace its mission back to the days when George Washington, America's first president, wanted government agents to collect a tax on whiskey.

In the ATF Director's suite in Washington, both Higgins and David Troy, the highly capable Director of the Bureau's Intelligence division, had ruled out the option of arresting Koresh outside the compound. They knew the cult leader liked to go jogging. They were aware that he sometimes drank in Chelsea's bar in downtown Waco. But as David Troy later told a Congressional inquiry committee, they felt that, by the time of the raid, Koresh was "so kinked up" he hardly ever left the compound.

Anyway, even if Koresh had been arrested outside, ATF agents would still have had to search the ranch for weapons and explosives. That would have sparked resistance from other cult members who were just as violent.

In the week leading up to the February 28 raid, Higgins took the Waco plan to his superiors at the Treasury Department. An operation of this size involved considerable risk. Higgins was experienced enough to know it would require political approval. The ATF chief needed to cover his back. But he was clearly expecting a rubber stamp.

On February 26 Higgins presented his proposal to storm the Waco compound plan to Ronald Noble, a rising young black lawyer whom President Clinton had just appointed Assistant Treasury Secretary for Enforcement. Noble was not impressed.

"I had enough information to think of one word and that word was MOVE," Noble said later. MOVE was a violent

religious cult which had fought off a police attempt to storm its headquarters in Philadelphia in 1985. Noble, then a young Philadelphia prosecutor, had investigated the circumstances that had led local police to bomb the cult's house killing eleven people, including five children.

The MOVE operation had been widely seen as a law enforcement disaster. Noble, now in overall political control of the ATF, Customs, and the Secret Service, did not want to see a repeat. To the astonishment of the ATF director, he refused point blank to approve the Waco plan, citing the risks a violent confrontation might pose to the lives of women and children.

Circumstances now conspired to contaminate the decision-making process. Higgins had gone to Noble on February 26, the day of the spectacular terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center. As news of the bombing came in, the law enforcement bureaucracy in Washington was in meltdown. The Secret Service and its Treasury Department supervisors were overstretched and heavily distracted. They had time only for the briefest of details.

When Higgins objected to Noble's decision to turn down the Waco raid, the Assistant Treasury Secretary pressed him for further justification. The ATF Director now blurted out that there was an imminent danger of "mass suicide" by cult members. The ATF would have to go in to prevent it. With that warning, Higgins left Noble to ponder the consequences.

After consulting a short "advisory" note from a Treasury/ATF liaison official outlining the reasons for the raid, Noble went to see John Simpson, the acting Assistant Treasury Secretary, telling him that he opposed the Waco raid. It was Simpson who made the final decisions.

"I was thinking about the children and – I'll admit it, I'm a sexist – the women," Noble recalled. "I didn't see how the lives of the women and children inside would be protected ... I told John ... if I were you, I wouldn't sign off on this." Simpson agreed, sending Higgins a message demanding

answers to a series of extra questions.

Higgins came back, insisting in a late-night conference call that the operation was the last chance to catch the Branch Davidians unprepared, away from their stockpile of heavy weapons. The ATF had spent months planning the raid. Moreover, the local newspaper, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* was planning a major exposé of the cult. Imminent publication was bound to tip off Koresh that the ATF was about to act.

The paper, Higgins added for good measure, was going to accuse the authorities of standing idly by as Koresh stockpiled illegal firearms. The agency needed to go in now to retain the element of surprise.

Noble and Simpson, preoccupied by the bombing of the World Trade Center, took Higgins at his word. That night, the ATF's political masters gave their approval to the Waco raid. At the World Trade Center, rescue teams were still dealing with the dead and injured. Waco seemed, and was, a thousand miles away.

Given the scope and potential risks involved, Higgins deemed it politic to invite other state and federal agencies to observe the raid. Thus, as dawn broke on the morning of February 28, David Koresh found himself the object of attention from no fewer than eight separate law enforcement agencies, all claiming varying degrees of "competent jurisdiction" in the case. Together with the ATF there were representatives from the McLennan County Sheriff's Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the US Customs Service and the US Marshal's Service. For good measure Higgins had also ordered up three helicopters from the Texas National Guard. There was information that Koresh and some of his people had been producing drugs at the compound.

The assault on Mount Carmel was therefore more than just a large-scale law enforcement operation. It would be a shop-window demonstration of the ATF's tactical finesse, an exercise which, if successful, would immeasurably bolster its uncertain

status in the national security community. The Bureau was still relatively new to the federal law enforcement community. But it had all the ambitions of a parvenu.

The agency had been set up in its present form in 1972 to take over enforcement of the laws on tobacco, alcohol, guns and explosives from the Internal Revenue Service. But its provenance went back to the 1920s and 1930s when, in the years after alcohol was banned in America, it was known as the Bureau of Prohibition. The Bureau remained proud of its most famous agent, Eliot Ness, whose long fight against Al Capone, the Chicago gangster and bootlegger, earned him immortality in the film and television series *The Untouchables*. Ness's photograph still graces the walls of the ATF's Washington office, along with a photograph of his original credentials.

During the 1940s the bureau gained additional responsibility for weapons. Today it licenses America's estimated 250,000 firearms dealers. The efficiency of its database was highlighted in 1981 when it took twenty minutes to trace the gun used by John Hinckley to shoot President Reagan, to a Dallas pawn shop. When it came to weapons investigations, no one could touch the ATF.

The Waco operation was to be co-ordinated from a command post at the Texas State Technical College, just two miles from the compound. Its commander was Ted Royster, special agent-in-charge of the Bureau's Dallas field office.

The weekend of the raid got off to an ominous start. On Saturday 27 February, 48 hours before zero-hour, Royster picked up a copy of that morning's local newspaper, the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, to see a familiar face smiling sheepishly out at him. The paper's editor, Bob Lott, had chosen that morning to kick off a damning seven-part investigative series on Koresh and the Davidians. The series, entitled "The Sinful Messiah", was a detailed exposé of life in the compound. Based on ten months' research by Mark England and Darlene McCormick, two of the paper's senior reporters, it informed its readers that Koresh was stockpiling a substantial armoury. More

controversially, it also accused him of being a child abuser.

The first article, occupying the entire top half of the *Tribune*'s front page, was accompanied by a panel headlined "The Law Watches, But Has Done Little". It seemed calculated to force the Bureau's hand.

The ATF had known of the newspaper's forthcoming article for more than a month. In late January 1993, senior officials had approached Bob Lott, the editor, begging him to hold off. Lott appreciated their dilemma, but said the situation at Mount Carmel was such "a dangerous and sinister thing, the public should know about it". If that meant tipping off Koresh – who presumably read the paper or knew people who did – it was a necessary price to pay for alerting the public. The *Tribune-Herald* did the Bureau one favour, though. Nowhere in the seven-part series did it reveal the ATF's inquiries.

"If you are a Branch Davidian," the article began, "Christ lives on a threadbare piece of land ten miles east of Waco called Mount Carmel. He has dimples, claims a ninth-grade education, married his legal wife when she was fourteen, enjoys a beer now and then, plays a mean guitar, reportedly packs a Glock 9mm and keeps an arsenal of military assault rifles, and willingly admits that he is a sinner without equal."

The newspaper concentrated more on the allegations of child abuse than on the question of illegal weapons. Nonetheless, the article uncannily mirrored the ATF's own conclusions.

Royster and the rest of the ATF high command were flabbergasted. The raid had been planned for the following Monday morning. Now Royster had to move fast. The decision was taken there and then to bring it forward 24 hours, to Sunday 28 February. That Saturday, the ATF command team struggled to contain their panic.

The *Tribune-Herald* article was just the start of the Bureau's troubles with the media. A more significant hiccup occurred the next morning. The warrants were scheduled to be

executed at 9.45am that Sunday morning, but unknown to Royster and the rest of the ATF command team, disaster had already struck. The Bureau's Dallas office was so confident of its ability to storm the Mount Carmel compound, arrest Koresh and survive with its agents unscathed that it decided to call in the media. Accordingly, on the weekend of the raid, an ATF public affairs officer telephoned local news reporters in Dallas informing them that a major Bureau operation was pending. Following the Bureau's strict ban on disclosing operational details, the press officer didn't say where or when the raid was due, but the Texas media had only to read Saturday's copy of the *Waco Tribune-Herald* to see what was afoot. In the first of a series of ironies which came to characterise the Waco tragedy, the Bureau's rather naked attempt to attract favourable publicity was to have calamitous consequences for its agents.

Two hours before the raid, David Jones, 38-year-old brother-in-law of David Koresh, was driving back from his job as a local postal delivery man when he noticed a television photographer who appeared to be lost. When Jones pulled up to see if he could help the nervous-looking journalist, the newsman saw the familiar US Postal Service markings on his van and hesitantly inquired, "Are you really a mailman?" After Jones confirmed truthfully that he was, the TV journalist warned him, "There's going to be a big gunfight with these religious nuts over here. You better get out." Jones thanked the man politely and drove straight on to the compound.

Special Agent Robert Rodriguez, the ATF's undercover man inside the compound, arrived at Mount Carmel early that Sunday morning. He met briefly with Koresh and Schneider. Half way through their discussion, Koresh was suddenly summoned away by Perry Jones, Koresh's father-in-law. Rodriguez, remaining in the foyer, saw David Jones rush into the building in a panic. He said he had just been told by a local journalist that the ranch was going to be raided. Minutes later, Koresh strode back into the room and exclaimed that

the ATF and the National Guard were coming to get him. According to Earl Dunagan, an ATF agent, "Howell continued, saying, 'Neither ATF or the National Guard will ever get me. They got me once, and they will never get me again. They are coming; the time has come.'"

Rodriguez left the compound, desperate to alert ATF commanders that the element of surprise had been lost.

Inside the compound word quickly spread that a raid was imminent. Neal Vaega roamed from room to room shouting "the Assyrians are coming" – a reference to one of the cult leader's names for his enemies. Vaega seemed terrified of the imminent showdown.

Within minutes, Koresh activated his doomsday plan. Cult members stopped Bible readings, laundry duty and other routine Sunday morning tasks and rushed to their appointed action stations. There they donned a range of paramilitary gear in readiness for the coming battle. Koresh himself paced the foyer, bristling for action. He was dressed in black. In his hands he held a converted AR-15 automatic machine-gun. He ordered the dozen or so elderly cult members to take refuge in their ground-floor rooms. The children were told to hide under tables and beds in their rooms upstairs.

Koresh then ordered that weapons and other *matériel* be drawn from the cult's huge armoury. Out came 100 fully automatic AR-15/M-16 machine-guns, together with radio equipment and police scanners. Dozens of armed cult members were given tactical vests, designed to carry firearms, ammunition and magazines. According to court documents, the vests had been sewn by eight women residents: Lisa Farris, Felicita Sonobe, Margarida Vaega, Susan Benta, Beverly Elliot, Sherri Jewell, Juliete Martinez and Rita Riddle. They would be fully implicated in the scenario that was now unfolding.

Throughout the compound the adults prepared for the confrontation. Alrick Bennett, John McBean, James Riddle, Peter Gent, Peter Hipsman and Pablo Cohen all armed themselves. Mark Wendel and some of the others also donned

black clothing. Douglas Wayne Martin, one of Koresh's Mighty Men, unpacked two boxes of home-made hand grenades and stood guard over them as they lay on the dining-room table. Martin himself had a string of grenades wrapped round his neck. Armageddon was coming. The Branch Davidians were readying themselves for battle.

In broad daylight, shortly after 9.30am on the morning of Sunday February 28, more than 100 ATF special agents descended on Ranch Apocalypse. To preserve what many of them still believed was the element of surprise, the agents were hidden inside two cattle trailers each towed by an unmarked ATF pick-up truck.

To the Mighty Men, looking out from the gun ports and the watchtower, it must have seemed an odd spectacle. For just behind the cattle trucks, trundling down the Farm Double EE Road towards them, was a motley procession of television and radio trucks, their bright white satellite dishes and aerial masts gleaming in the morning sun. A Bronco pick-up truck carrying John McLemore, a Dallas TV reporter, was also close behind. His TV station would broadcast the imminent drama to the rest of the world.

The raid had been meticulously planned. Its execution should have been straightforward. In the first seven seconds, the first ATF tactical team would leave the cattle truck and burst through the front door. Within 22 seconds, a second tactical unit would race up ladders, enter the first floor of the compound and make a beeline for the weapons cache. Other assault teams, using ropes and ladders, would storm through windows and doors at the sides and rear of the building. The entire compound and its immediate perimeter would be secured in 60 seconds flat. But from the first seconds, what should have a surprise attack turned into a bloody ambush.

Inside the ranch, David Koresh and the Mighty Men stood ready for battle. The cult leader was standing in the partially opened front door. Beneath his black combat clothes he sported a bullet-proof vest. The ATF unit with the search and

arrest warrants strode forward, shouting their identities and explaining their purpose. Koresh looked the lead officer in the eye and gave him a smile. He took one step back and firmly closed the door. One second later, a withering barrage of automatic gunfire erupted from inside the compound. The bullets began piercing outward through the front door and adjoining walls.

The first to fall was Robert Williams, a 26-year-old special agent from the Bureau's office in Little Rock, Arkansas. Williams was a few yards behind the frontal assault team, giving them cover, when he fell injured. He got up and commenced firing, in a bid to offer his colleagues at the door the benefit of covering fire, but the Little Rock officer was hit again. This time his wounds were fatal.

Up on the chapel roof, one member of the second assault team had made it up the ladder and was about to enter the bedroom window. But then Federal Agent Kenny King was hit by a hail of gunfire. King fell, his right elbow shattering as he took bullet wounds in the leg and chest. He crashed to the ground but was able to scream repeated requests into his radio: "Come get me, I'm dying. I'm bleeding to death."

King's colleagues looked on helplessly as hundreds of bullets whizzed by. "Your heart went out to him," said one agent. "There was nothing we could do. People want to know what it was like. There were at least 12,000 rounds fired. It was like Iwo Jima."

The gunports were now aflame with the flash of automatic fire. Bullets were coming out through the wooden walls. They were coming from the first floor. They were coming up through the roof. They were coming from the watchtower.

Dozens of agents were desperately trying to get out of the poorly protected cattle trucks to rush towards their designated positions. If they had stayed put, the slaughter from the large-calibre bullets would have been even greater. As one federal agent left the truck, a bullet from an automatic rifle pierced his skull. He died a few minutes later.

The ATF commanders had anticipated problems from the watchtower. They had had the foresight to station an ATF tactical sniper team inside a house 250 yards away. The three snipers now trained their target scopes on the source of the gunfire from the tower. "They were suppressing some of the heavy gunfire," one agent later told the *Washington Post*'s reporter Pierre Thomas. "There was a cult member in the tower with a machine-gun, and they probably had three or four rifles that sounded like battleship guns. The holes those things were putting into the trucks ... my God."

Inside and outside the compound walls the attackers and the attacked fell dying. Robert Williams was already dead. Conway LeBleu, 30, went down. Steven Willis, 32, from the ATF Houston office and Todd McKeehan, 28, a veteran of Operation Desert Storm, were also fatally injured. The day before the raid McKeehan had called his family and told them he was worried about the assignment. According to his father, Tony, "He knew his life was on the line. But he said he'd die doing it. He loved his job."

Inside the compound and up on the watchtower six cult members were also to die. As the drama unfolded live on television, three ATF agents from the Bureau's New Orleans division raced up the ladder to the first floor of the compound. Their objective was Koresh's first-floor bedroom and the arsenal that lay beyond it. As they tried to storm the window, they were hit by a lethal barrage of lead. The bullets were so large they left huge petal-shaped craters in the wooden walls. Other shots came up through the roof. The New Orleans tactical team fell back, their bodies spread flat against the tar roof. One agent, caught as if frozen in horror at the top of the ladder, did not seem to know whether to go up to save his colleagues or down to relative safety. Two members of this tactical unit would die.

Lying against the outside wall in front of the foyer, several ATF agents had been hit by the initial burst of fire and were now struggling to remain conscious. Inside they could hear

the urgent sound of men's voices calling to each other. One agent heard the names "David" and "Wayne". The two men appeared to be co-ordinating the firefight. Koresh was hit in the wrist but the defiant cult leader continued to orchestrate his defences from just behind the front door. The agents recognised the sound of automatic and semi-automatic gunfire. It was coming from almost every window. It was coming through the walls and the doors. There was the sound of large-calibre weapons. Ominously, they could hear the sound of exploding grenades.

The first two tactical teams had been forced back. But some ATF agents did make it up onto the roof and into the compound. Inside they came face to face with cultists who fired straight at them. Even the women on the first floor were armed to the teeth. The women had rifles. They included Teresa Nobreiga, Rita Riddle, Floracita Sonobe, Margarida Vaega and Jaydean Wendel. Court documents later revealed that nearly all of the other adult cult members were actively involved in the shoot-out. Aaron Calais, Abebowale Davies, Phillip and Stephen Henry, Floyd Houtman, James Riddle, Cliff Sellors and Lorraine Sylvia were all seen with guns. The ATF and its informants also saw others with rifles: Alrick Bennett, Jamie Castillo, Pablo Cohen, Clive Doyle, Lisa Farris, Douglas Martin, John McBean, Steve Schneider, Scott Sonobe, Neal Vaega, Shari Doyle, Yvette Fagan, Raymond Friesoen, Diana Henry, Sherri Jewell, Sheila Martin, Rosemary Martin and Kevin Whitecliff. Judy Schneider and Katherine Andrade were wearing gun belts. That totalled at least 33 cult members, many heavily armed, who were defending the ranch with Koresh. They were all prepared to die in defence of their beliefs and their messiah. Many of them would be injured. Others were dead or about to die. With Koresh, those who were hit included David Jones, the US postal worker who had received the original tip-off, Judy Schneider, Scott Sonobe and Brad Branch.

As the battle continued there were remarkable scenes of

courage. Bill Buford, a former Green Beret and an ATF special agent, was part of the three-man New Orleans team that was up on the first floor, trying to get into the cult leader's bedroom. Buford went down, a bullet in the left hip. The thud felt as if he'd been hit with a baseball bat. He took a second round in his left leg.

Another of his team was also injured. Together they beat a hasty retreat. Buford rolled over and over until he fell off the roof. His colleagues below tried to cushion his fall. Buford cracked four ribs.

They pulled Buford back, further from the line of fire. But the bullets kept coming. Someone inside wanted to finish Buford off. Four rounds went by his head, including one that grazed the bridge of his nose. A colleague wearing a bullet-proof vest tried to shield him from the onslaught. "I told him he wasn't going to get a Congressional Medal of Honor for this," Buford said. "He replied, 'I just wasn't going to let them shoot you anymore.'"

As the grenades exploded all around them, a team of ATF medics rushed towards the wounded. One medic had his first aid bag blown right out of his hand.

Slowly, the ATF agents retreated, in shock and bitter disarray. The sound of gunfire began to die away. An ATF unit in a nearby house rang the compound to attempt to negotiate a ceasefire. The talks were heated, but the shooting became more sporadic. Finally, after 45 minutes of the most intensive shoot-out in the ATF's history, David Koresh gave the command to cease fire. But not before he had demanded that all the agents put down their guns and stand up in the open. The ATF reluctantly complied.

Buford, King and fourteen others were pulled to safety. Conway LeBleu was dead on arrival at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center. Two of his colleagues were also dead or dying. In Waco's Providence Hospital a fourth agent died on the operating table. Along with the four ATF agents who died, another sixteen were injured. Inside the cult compound, six cult

members, including Perry Jones and Mike Schroeder lay dead. As the ATF pulled back, the FBI in Washington were called in. The shoot-out would now turn into a siege.

In the waiting rooms and corridors of the Hillcrest Medical Center grown men, seasoned veterans of countless shoot-outs, broke down in tears. The survivors' wounds were massive. The scale of the disaster was slowly dawning.

When Pat Muhl, the Hillcrest Duty Nursing Supervisor, got home twelve hours later, she found it hard to take in. "We never expected anything like this. It was all so emotional. I just kept reliving the entire day over and over again. I'll never forget that day as long as I live."

Part Two

4

The Prophet on the Prairie

Vernon Wayne Howell was born, the illegitimate son of a carpenter, in Houston, Texas on August 17, 1959. His mother, Bonnie Clark, was fourteen years old when she became pregnant by Bobby Howell, her twenty-year-old lover. Two years later, Bobby left Bonnie for another woman and Bonnie put Vernon in the care of her mother and older sister. In 1965, when Vernon was five, she married Roy Haldeman, a former merchant seaman, and took Vernon back. The family moved to the Fort Worth–Dallas area where Vernon's stepfather had a farm.

As soon as Vernon was old enough to read the Bible he became interested in religion. Then he became obsessed with it. Encouraged by his mother, he joined the First Baptist Church. "That's where I first found Christ," he said years later. Later the family moved to Tyler, East Texas, where Vernon joined the Seventh Day Adventist Church, a nonconformist Christian denomination. The young Vernon had learning difficulties at school, he was dyslexic and had a stutter, but he excelled at sport and showed a preternatural instinct for learning the Bible. By the age of twelve, Bonnie Haldeman later said, her son knew the whole of the New Testament by rote.

Vernon never liked school. During the Waco siege he would be asked by FBI negotiators to recall his most unhappy memory. It was when he was at school, he replied. Seeing Vernon and a friend approach, a group of classmates shouted, "Here come the retards." Vernon was indeed dyslexic, but he knew

he was not a retard. The chip, though, was firmly placed upon his shoulder.

By the ninth grade, aged fourteen, Howell had dropped out. In place of a formal structured education, he found religion. In place of a father, he found God.

The Tyler congregation welcomed him into their fold. The Seventh Day Adventists were a peace-loving denomination who worshipped with a quiet fervour. Their faith had been born on the back of a prophecy that had never been fulfilled. They conducted their business with a modesty becoming this "great disappointment".

The most disappointed of all had been William Miller, the New England preacher who had been their founder. Miller had prophesied the second coming of Christ sometime between 1843 and 1844. When the Advent didn't materialise, and the Messiah failed to show up, the Adventists made the best of a bad job. They stuck to their faith in the Bible, and their affirmation of traditional Christian and family values. Adventism found greatest favour in the American South. It appealed to the decent, law-abiding and conservative nature of millions of Americans, attracted by its belief in the sanctity of the family. Models of Christian sobriety, Adventists distinguished themselves from followers of other creeds by a strict observance of the Seventh Day Sabbath, Saturday.

The Fourth Commandment had ordered the Jews to obey the Sabbath. Nowadays everyone but the Jews ignored it. The Seventh Day Adventists thought that by adhering to the Fourth Commandment they might earn some grace and favour. There were other rules too: 27 fundamentals to be exact. These included not eating pork, a ban on smoking and a dedicated opposition to pornography and gambling. The church spread to Britain in 1873 but continued to grow most strongly in America. By the late 1970s, when Howell joined, it was building a reputation for social activism and running a network of schools and hospitals.

Vernon Howell didn't spend every day in church. To those

who knew him then, he seemed a typical rootless teenager from a white, lower-class mid-Texas background. For work he fixed machinery. For pleasure he messed around with cars and played guitar. Most of all, he spoke tirelessly about religion. Yet before 1980, when he first began to claim divine inspiration, there was not a hint of what he would become.

Years later Howell would tell his disciples that he had once been the victim of child abuse. Perhaps he was just trying to tell those of his disciples who were parents that there was nothing exceptional about what he was doing to their children. Perhaps he liked to exaggerate the difficulties of his past. Whatever his motive, Bonnie Haldeman always denied it. In interviews after the disastrous ATF raid, Vernon's mother would recall her son as a devoutly Christian though lonely child who spent hours praying by himself. "I've seen him sitting by his bed, on his knees for hours, crying and praying," she recalled.

Vernon was acutely sensitive to rejection and became prone to bouts of paranoia early in his life. On one occasion he threw a tantrum when older members of the local Adventist church banned him from services. They had good reason: Vernon had become infatuated with the minister's daughter and was becoming a nuisance. "It was mostly the coldness of the church he was in that affected him," his mother said. Haldeman's comments, depicting Vernon as an innocent, slightly pathetic and already persecuted young man, came shortly after she sold the rights to her life story to a Hollywood producer for a reported $54,000.

Howell's transformation came in his twenties. The lanky, long-haired youth was a dedicated pacifist. A child of the 1960s' flower-power generation, he spoke easily of peace and love wherever he went. "He has totally changed. He was really nice," former cult member Robyn Bunds told a Texas newspaper. "He was really humble. He was very well-mannered. Over the years, though, he's lost a lot of those qualities. He's become this obnoxious, foul-mouthed, pushy person because

of the power he has over these people."

Howell took to rock music in the late 1970s. He formed a band in which he played lead electric guitar. One of those who played in the band with him claimed that the future cult leader spent much of his time under the influence of the hallucinogenic drug LSD. This testimony is significant. LSD can induce psychotic reactions among regular users. Its symptoms, well-documented in authoritative pharmacological studies, include heightened sensory perception and a feeling of well-being which some users describe as a "godlike" euphoria. Taken in excessive doses or in the wrong circumstances, the drug can cause paranoia. In view of LSD's well known "mind-bending" qualities, it seems reasonable to speculate that the drug may have altered Howell's own sense of his privileged relationship with God. His conviction that he was divinely inspired may have stemmed from or been exaggerated by repeated heavy doses of the drug.

The writer Aldous Huxley, describing the effects of hallucinogens, reported feeling a higher level of consciousness. Huxley claimed "the doors of perception" to Heaven and Hell were opened by the drug. Such claims do not, of course, bear scientific scrutiny, but they can be useful in understanding how an LSD user reacts while under the drug's influence. If Howell did take the drug during the formative years of his late teens, that may have played a significant part in the sudden change in his personality as he approached his twentieth year.

For Howell a turning point came that year when he was expelled from his congregation at the Seventh Day Adventist church in Tyler. His departure was due to a combination of two factors which began increasingly to dominate the would-be prophet's life: religion and sex. Howell had joined the congregation in 1978, when he was eighteen. "He was a kook, a genuine religious fanatic who was almost totally irrational," said Cyril Miller, President of the Adventists' Southwestern Union Theology Center in Burleson, Texas.

Joan Berlin Chilson, a senior member of the Tyler congregation told the *Waco Tribune-Herald* that in 1980 Howell had told her late husband that God had given Sandy, the couple's teenage daughter, to him. Howell misjudged his move. Chilson's then husband, L. Hartley Berlin, was the pastor of Tyler Seventh Day Adventist church and he did not take kindly to the advances of this scruffy twenty-year-old towards his daughter. Berlin banned Howell from seeing Sandy. The word spread. Howell was cold-shouldered by the rest of the congregation. The next year he was ignominiously expelled.

Even then, Howell remained supremely confident of God's will. "He would act like he knew every sentence of the Bible," Chilson told the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, " ... to uphold anything he wanted."

It was with an incipient sense of his own divine destiny that Vernon Howell drifted into the Branch Davidian community at the New Mount Carmel Center. He went there more out of curiosity than religious fervour. He was 21. The world was before him. But he seemed to have nowhere to go.

"I didn't know what went on there," he said of his first visit in 1981. "I was just a bonehead coming in to see what was going on." He was simply looking for a community and a home where he could stay a while.

The Davidians had been founded by Victor Houteff, a Bulgarian émigré who had grown up as a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Houteff didn't like the way his church was run and left after a disagreement with its leaders. He emigrated to the United States in 1907, settling in Rockford, Illinois where he ran a small hotel.

Houteff eventually joined the then flourishing Seventh Day Adventists and moved to Los Angeles where he became a lay preacher and assistant superintendent at the Seventh Day Adventist Sabbath School. But the Bulgarian grew unhappy with the views of the Seventh Day Adventists. For a second time in his religious career he clashed with church leaders and was excommunicated in 1929. Houteff went on to form

his own group in Los Angeles, where his disciples saw him as an inspired prophet. In 1934 he backed the purchase and development of a 300-acre self-contained settlement called the Old Mount Carmel Center, just west of Waco in Texas. The centre had its own shops and hospital. It even printed its own money. By the end of the 1930s 100 residents were living out a simple existence there in a hilly, wooded area overlooking the city.

Victor Houteff may have split with the Seventh Day Adventists but he brought with him much of their religious baggage. Like the Adventists, the breakaway group was a non-conformist Christian denomination which believed in the second coming of Jesus Christ. The return of the Messiah would come after the Apocalypse, the fiery conflagration described in the final book of the New Testament, Revelations.

In 1943, according to Professor Bill Pitts of Waco's Baylor University, Houteff began to believe that David's Kingdom in Palestine was imminent. He promptly changed the group's name to the Davidian Seventh Day Adventists and prepared for the Promised End.

Houteff prophesied the Second Coming, and led his followers to believe that life at the Mount Carmel settlement would last less than a year. But like William Miller 100 years before him, he and his followers were doomed to suffer major disappointment. As the years went by, they waited and waited. Meanwhile they grew increasingly remote, their splendid isolation reinforced by a rule, imposed by Houteff, prohibiting sect members from marrying non-believers.

Despite the group's professed high moral standards, it was not immune from scandal. In the mid-1950s, according to Professor Pitts, a master at the sect's own school was caught seducing many of his young female pupils. The Mount Carmel school was shut down, and from that time until the late 1980s Davidian children were sent to local government schools.

The sect suffered a second, shattering, blow in 1955 when, much to the astonishment of his followers who had believed

he was immortal, Victor Houteff passed away. The preacher's widow, Florence, duly took charge while the group awaited her dead husband's return as King in the new Kingdom. The sect had always had money problems and by the time he died Victor Houteff had wisely sold off parts of the Old Mount Carmel property.

Some observers said the Old Mount Carmel site was worth $27m. But in the late 1950s, when Florence Houteff finally completed its sale, she realised just $600,000. Much of the cash was used to buy a new home for the Davidians, a 941-acre compound on rolling farmland ten miles east of Waco. Florence promoted herself to President of the Davidians and christened the compound the New Mount Carmel Center. The property expanded and soon there was an administration building, eighteen modest frame houses, a huge assembly hall, a cafeteria and an open-air tent that could take 1,000 people, a large dairy barn, farm equipment and livestock.

Florence Houteff now made her own bid for fame as a prophetess. She picked the Jewish Passover in 1959 as the day the Kingdom would be established. The prophecy convinced many, and hundreds of new disciples joined the group, disposing of their homes and businesses to pay tithes to the cult.

The group reached its zenith on April 23 that year when more than 1,000 Davidians from across the world gathered on a wet hillside outside Waco to await the final Day of Judgement. Told they would see a divine sign in Waco on Passover, they assembled in a huge tent city for the Judgement Day. The coming of the "Great Event" received international media coverage. "They expected God to pick them up and take them to Israel," said Catherine Matteson, a long-standing Davidian follower.

Once more, the deadline came and went. Disillusioned group members began to lose faith. Many disciples left altogether. Others joined up with Ben Roden, a rival prophet who had formed a small breakaway group with his wife Lois

in Odessa, Texas. Roden called his community the Branch Davidians.

Ben Roden was an opportunist-turned-preacher with an eye for the main chance. On April 22, 1959, the supposed day of reckoning, he had arrived at Mount Carmel from a trip to Israel, claiming that *he* was the sign everyone had been waiting for. The power-play did not go down well with Florence Houteff, who arranged for Roden to be unceremoniously escorted from the property.

Roden returned to Odessa, but soon dozens of disillusioned Davidians followed. Their new minister claimed to have been sent by God to deliver the message of the Fifth Angel of Revelation. In 1965, after Florence Houteff had died, Ben Roden moved back and took possession and legal title to the New Mount Carmel Center. However, the property went into decline and eventually shrank to 77 acres.

When Ben Roden died in 1978, his widow Lois took over the presidency of the Branch Davidians, assuring her followers that she would deliver the message of the Sixth Angel. Lois remained leader until 1984 but her final years were marred by squabbles for the leadership. This time the rift was between Lois's son, George Buchanan Roden, and an ambitious, charismatic young Branch Davidian with ideas of his own. His name was Vernon Howell.

When Howell wandered into Mount Carmel in 1981 Lois Roden's disciples could see he had something in common with the sect's founder Victor Houteff. He was an outcast, rejected by the orthodox. Howell himself was gratified by the comparison but for the first year or two was content to play the devoted follower.

"I came to Waco in search of truth," he said during his 1988 trial. "Someone had informed me [that there was] a teacher there [who was] above average in their opinion, and I came and I met Lois Roden."

Lois Roden instantly took to the lean, attractive young drifter. She gave him a job as a mechanic responsible for

repairing the Branch vehicles. Howell soon had a garage shed, a Kennedy tool box worth $800, and a role in society. He settled in quickly. He liked the simple way of life. Despite their troubled history, the Davidians seemed to be peace-loving, decent people. They didn't smoke or drink. They didn't covet material goods or wear expensive clothes. There were lots of pleasant young women, too, and Vernon liked that.

Janet Kendrick, a cult member, summed up the women's attitude to dress: "We believe in wearing clothes that are modest," she told a local newspaper in 1988. "We don't believe in wearing clothes that are revealing. God didn't intend for women to go around trying to lure men. But we don't believe in appearing strange or weird. A dress that comes to the knees is fine. If someone wore a mini-skirt, however, we would not approve."

Kendrick's daughter Brenda described the simple way of life on the compound at the time Howell joined the sect: "I've got almost everything I want. I have a home, enough clothes, running water, food. We don't starve. And I get time to do my hobbies, knitting and embroidery. I think I've got as good as anybody." The children did their chores, went to Bible classes and studied scripture twice a day.

The uncomplicated, natural lifestyle gave Vernon a chance to develop his musical talents. He became the community's songwriter, forming a rock-and-roll band with other residents. His ambitions at this stage seemed unpretentious: he wanted to be a musician and a minister, nothing else seemed to matter. Vernon enjoyed the simple life. He relished the home-grown vegetarian food. He exercised regularly, through physical training and weightlifting. He spent his evenings playing guitar or reading the Bible. He got on well with the men. The women were attracted to his youthful charm. The presence of so many beautiful children made it seem like one big happy family. It was a tight-knit community, self-sufficient from the outside world. Everyone seemed young and eager to help.

This seemingly idyllic lifestyle would soon be ruined by the ambitions of Ben Roden's eldest son. On his first day at Mount Carmel, Howell met George Roden. George, middle-aged and with a history of mental instability, was still smarting over a bitter power struggle he'd had with his mother over the presidency of the Branch Davidian Association. Relations between mother and son had deteriorated rapidly after Ben Roden's death. When George began administering the affairs of the Association, two long-standing sect residents, Clive Doyle and Perry Jones, a former minister, decided they would oust him. They told Lois that unless her elder son moved out, the sect would lose the $10,000 monthly tithe money it received from Australia. Since the Australian income represented the lion's share of the Association's income and was controlled by Clive Doyle, Lois Roden had little choice.

In 1979 Roden obtained a restraining order in the 19th State District Court preventing her son from living or setting foot on the property. George Roden and one of his two wives – his second was in Israel – moved their mobile trailer home two miles down the road to Bellmead. When he tried to return to the property in October that year, the Waco State Court fined him $500 for breaking the injunction.

Howell knew Roden was trouble from the moment the two met. George was still seething. "I pacified him," Howell said later. "He was always trying to tell me that his mother had taken his crown."

Soon Howell's practical abilities became indispensable. "I was in charge of the mechanic work," he told the 1988 court when asked about his role between 1982 and 1984, "the plumbing, reconstructing. I took care of Granny Scott, I was just the handyman."

By 1982 Lois had invited him to become a full-time resident. Howell moved into a wooden frame house on the compound. Lois Roden was impressed by his musical abilities. She bought him musical equipment using money provided by Raymond Frezene, another cult member. Vernon quickly

became close to several leading cult members, including Clive Doyle, who represented the important Australian membership, and Perry Jones, the Executive Secretary of the Branch Davidians and their long-standing spokesman. Howell and Jones got on well and soon became trusted confidants. The next year Howell married Jones' daughter Rachel. The ceremony was held in the sect's church. No-one seemed concerned that Rachel was just fourteen.

The turning point came later that year when Howell visited Israel. Overnight, the journey turned him from a disciple into a preacher. "In 'eighty-three I had come back from Israel with some very important information linking the New Testament with the Old Testament," he said during his trial. "Because of the experience I obtained, I was teaching at the time." Just what Howell learned in Israel is unclear, but shortly after his return he began having an affair with Lois Roden, then aged 67.

Howell later claimed his relations with Lois were divinely inspired. With God acting as his pimp, he could hardly go wrong. In reality, though, his sexual relationship with the widowed Branch Davidian leader was prompted as much by a newly found ambition to take her place, as it was by any command of God.

There was certainly an element of sacrifice on Howell's part. When challenged in 1992 by Mark England, the *Waco Tribune-Herald* reporter who first drew attention to the affair, Howell flatly denied it. "She was seventy years old, God bless her soul, but she was ugly. She was in competition with Medusa [presumably Rachel Howell, his wife]. But you know how old women are beautiful, in a different way. It's impossible, I never touched her."

Former cult members, though, claim Howell later told them that he had slept with Lois. Their relationship, Howell said, had been laid down in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 8:3: "And I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me: 'Call his name Maher-shalal-

hash-baz; for before the child knows how to cry "My father" or "My mother", the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried before the King of Assyria.'"

Howell would tell his followers that Roden had indeed become pregnant. She had miscarried, a punishment from God because she had syphoned off the cult's tithe money for her older children. Lois Roden, too, claimed to have lost the baby, but she said the miscarriage had been caused by the distressing tactics Howell had used against her in challenging her for control of the sect.

Baby or no baby, it was at about this time that Howell began to have the first conviction that he was closer to God than the others. He turned his Bible learning to good effect and was soon bewitching cult members with his extraordinary ability to recite large passages from both Old and New Testaments.

Meanwhile, jealousy of his new adversary was driving George Roden to the brink of permanent insanity. On one occasion George's threats prompted Howell to call in the Waco Sheriff. When Sheriff Thorn arrived to investigate, Roden, a bulky seventeen-stone figure, astonished the law officer by flattening Howell with a rugby tackle.

On another occasion, Roden aggressively bear-hugged Howell, nearly suffocating him. Vernon responded by reaching under George's bottom and picking him up off his feet. He recalled this incident at his 1988 trial, claiming that weightlifting had made him strong enough to perform the feat.

Roden was upset that Howell seemed to have taken his place in his mother's affections. The 49-year-old Davidian regarded himself as the natural heir to his father. Like Ben Roden, George, too, claimed to be the True Prophet. Catherine Matteson, the long-standing cult member who later survived the siege, recalled seeing Roden actually pray in his own name during a 1984 Davidian festival.

Most cult members saw George as a thoroughly pathetic figure, embittered by his mother's rejection. While Howell

was charismatic and an entrancing public speaker, George had trouble stringing sentences together. He used foul language and was always cussing and swearing.

Howell quickly became the dominant partner in his relationship with Lois, which now became a springboard for his bid for the cult leadership. By 1984, swayed by Howell's closeness to Lois Roden, many Davidians were now calling him the only True Prophet. Lois grew increasingly resentful of his naked attempts to subvert her. In a sudden shift of allegiance, she called in her son and they mounted a successful rearguard action to remove him.

The new alliance was almost certainly prompted by an extraordinary incident in which Vernon Howell was deeply implicated. In April 1983 a mysterious fire swept through the administration building of the New Mount Carmel Center, razing it to the ground. The fire was intense and destroyed everything inside. Lois Roden kept her counsel, but George, eager to exploit the fire, blamed Howell. Other cult members also testified at Howell's 1988 trial that Roden was convinced Vernon had set the fire. Uncannily, the blaze happened exactly ten years before the entire compound was torched at the climax of the FBI siege. The 1983 fire was almost certainly arson. On January 14, 1984 Howell reportedly issued a "death decree" against George Roden. It is possible the fire was set by Howell in a bid to remove Roden; an early precursor, perhaps, of the tragedy to come.

One thing is certain. Shortly after the fire, Lois and George Roden suddenly dropped their long-standing disagreements and teamed up to banish Vernon Howell from New Mount Carmel. At his mother's instruction, Roden moved his trailer home back from Bellmead to the ranch. Roden later testified: "I moved back out there because Vernon Howell had burnt down the $500,000 administration building and publishing house in April of that year. So that's why she asked me to move back out on the property to help her take care of the security of the property."

The fire, then, seems to have been a catalyst, fanning the flames of a long-running power struggle. When the split came to a head, Vernon Howell, accompanied by his wife and a handful of disciples, left Mount Carmel for the wilderness. Appropriately enough, he chose a tiny settlement 45 miles west of Waco called Palestine.

For the following four years, Howell and his "people" led a spartan existence, camped out in makeshift plywood shacks on the windy Texan prairie.

In 1985, George Roden, growing madder by the day, ran the remaining Davidians off the compound at gunpoint. Perry Jones and the others went to Palestine to live with Vernon. After Lois died in 1986, George Roden renamed the compound Rodenville. The demented failed prophet lived there with one of his two wives, seven families who were friends but not church members, and a couple of ex-convicts who spent much of the day firing machine-guns out on the prairie.

Howell's efforts to persuade the leaders of the Tyler Adventist congregation of his own godliness had been met with ridicule and contempt. His bid to take over the Branch Davidian community at Mount Carmel had been ruthlessly put down. At the Palestine camp, the primitive lifestyle and barren environment added to his sense of isolation from the outside world.

But things were going to change. In 1985 his wife Rachel gave birth to a beautiful boy, Cyrus. Two years later Rachel gave him a daughter, Star. The new family, together with the continuing devotion of the growing number of Davidians who had followed him, bolstered Howell in his faith.

In the Palestine camp, Howell could develop his charismatic style of leadership and putative powers of prophecy untrammelled by those who had previously questioned his legitimacy. With no check on his divine aspirations and the unyielding support of his disciples, he began genuinely to believe in his own unique relationship with God. His followers said he was the Prophet, but he maintained the dignified

and modest view that he was just a teacher. By the time of Lois Roden's death in 1986 an important part of his transformation was complete. Vernon Howell was no longer a rootless adolescent drifter with mixed up ideas and absurd delusions of grandeur. The Prophet on the Prairie had come of age.

5

A Coup at Mount Carmel

In the aftermath of the failed Waco prophecy of 1959, the New Mount Carmel Center became the subject of bitter legal battles. When the "Great Event" predicted by Florence Houteff failed to materialise, hundreds of Davidians filed lawsuits over the property and church funds. Many who had sold their homes and possessions to give tithes to the church before being allowed to live on the property to witness the miracle now demanded their money back.

The church had always survived on the proceeds of these "tithers", who fell into a "rich" group and a "poor" group. The poor tithers, who had given ten per cent of their income to the church, got nothing. They were simply kicked off the Mount Carmel land. The rich tithers – those who had donated twenty per cent of their income – were given two choices: either accept an offer of nineteen cents for every dollar given in tithes and leave the property; or remain on the property with a vested ownership interest. George Roden later claimed to have distributed $172,000 to some 70 second tithers.

So, in 1985, when Roden began to evict the remaining second tithers at gunpoint, Vernon Howell saw his chance. From his wilderness refuge amid the eight-by-twelve plywood shacks on Route 7 just outside Palestine, Howell discovered a popular cause around which to rally his supporters. He decided to campaign for the reinstatement of the second tithers. And because Roden had broken his mother's 1979 restraining order banning him from living at Mount Carmel, Howell could justly claim that he had the law on his side. Many of the

50 or so disciples living at the Palestine camp had been ruthlessly dispossessed. Howell decided he would lead a campaign to get them their property back. The pretext for the coup was an article in the local *Waco Tribune-Herald*. The newspaper stated that the local school authorities were planning to take action against the property over non-payment by George Roden of $62,660.84 in back taxes. Roden hadn't paid a cent since 1968. The McLennan County Independent School District and the Waco Independent School District had issued writs to seize the property.

Howell's first gambit was a failure. Using the savings of the Chungs, an elderly Hawaiian couple who also lived at the Palestine camp, Howell tried to raise a tax lien that would have allowed him to take on the property if he paid off the debt. When that bid failed, Howell changed tack.

In late October 1987, with the help of Douglas Wayne Martin, a 36-year-old Harvard-University-trained lawyer and sect member, Howell sent a letter to all the residents of the Mount Carmel site. The letter was almost certainly drafted by Martin, who had been advising Howell since joining the sect a couple of years before. Martin had already helped once before, in April 1985, when he had filed a contempt order on behalf of Howell, Perry Jones and Clive Doyle to get George off the Mount Carmel site. Roden, characteristically, had counter-sued, claiming $100m damages.

The 1987 letter advised residents that Roden had been removed as a trustee of the Branch Davidian Seventh Day Adventist Association, a registered charity. It gave notice that Vernon Howell had been installed as president and trustee in his place. The change of president had been registered in a notarised document filed with the County Clerk's office in Waco. The letter to the residents enclosed a copy of the document. It labelled Roden "just a trespasser". The letter asked the seven remaining Mount Carmel families to start sending any tithes or rents due to the church to Howell at a postal box address, on Route 7, Palestine.

As soon as he saw the letter, Roden knew he was facing trouble. "When they sent that letter out, I knew they were coming," he said later. "They sent an article removing me as trustee. Now they've come to finish the job and remove me from the land." The takeover battle was joined.

Meanwhile, Howell and Martin were developing a second line of attack. In October 1986, George Roden had dug up the coffin of Anna Hughes, a Branch Davidian follower who had been buried in the compound's graveyard twenty years before. By now far from sane, Roden claimed he had been trying to dig up all the bodies, in a bid to move the cemetery from the front of the compound to the back. The idea, he said, was to make the property more attractive. Roden's story was that the rear axle on his bulldozer had broken after he had removed the first coffin. He decided to abandon his plan to relocate the cemetery, draped the coffin with an Israeli flag, and left it in the Mount Carmel church.

Three times the following Easter George Roden attempted to raise the body from the dead. Three times, he was disappointed. Perhaps Roden was not Christ after all. He certainly didn't seem capable of resurrection. After one of the compound residents complained to the Sheriff, Roden moved the casket to the mechanic's shed for storage. Then he made his big mistake.

Roden rang Vernon Howell in California and laid down a bizarre challenge: the first person to resurrect Anna Hughes' body was the True Prophet. The winner would become life president of the Branch Davidians and live at the Mount Carmel compound. Instead of rising to the challenge, Howell, acting on Wayne Martin's legal advice, reported Roden to the Sheriff, alleging his involvement in corpse abuse. After several days during which he tried unsuccessfully to get the Sheriff to press charges, Howell and seven of his strongest male followers took matters into their own hands.

On November 3, 1987, Woodrow Kendrick, an elderly group member, drove his battered old van with Howell and his gang

inside up to the Mount Carmel compound. The gang were dressed in black camouflage fatigues, bought the previous day in a sale at the K-Mart clothing store, and carried seven .223 Mini 14 rifles, a 12-gauge shotgun and 2,900 rounds of ammunition.

After several farcical hours of hide-and-seek they found George Roden in the afternoon. In the ensuing 45-minute commando-style shoot-out, Roden managed to hide behind a tree while firing off occasional bursts from his semi-automatic Uzi sub-machine-gun. Howell hid behind a car and fired back. Roden was hit by a round from one of the .223 rifles and was lucky to escape with gunpowder burns, a bullet wound to the fingers of his right hand, and bullet fragments in his chest. Captain Dan Weyenberg, one of the Sheriff's officers who raced to the compound to break up the fighting, said afterwards, "I don't think you could take a patrol out in Vietnam with that much ammo."

Roden told reporters who visited the scene that afternoon that Howell had come to execute Chapter 9 of the Book of Ezekiel. The chapter describes seven men carrying out a slaughter in Jerusalem. "They think it is the Holy War they have to wage against anybody," Roden claimed, adding for good measure that Howell and his men were terrorists from the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The confused Davidian leader explained that he had already sought protection from the Central Intelligence Agency, the FBI and the Attorney General's office. The authorities told him to wear a bullet-proof vest. He also took the opportunity of the unexpected media presence to announce that he was going to stand for the Democratic nomination for the President of the United States, but failed to remind reporters that it was an office he had sought unsuccessfully in 1976 after the party had banned him from entering their convention.

For their part, Howell and Perry Jones claimed they had only gone to the ranch to get photographic proof of the corpse, so the Sheriff could charge Roden with its abuse. The

idea had been to retake the land while Roden was in custody. Unfortunately, the Sheriff didn't see it like that. Howell, Paul Fatta, Stanley Sylvia, Gregory Summers, Peter Riddle, David Jones, Floyd Houtman and James Hipsman were all charged with the attempted murder of George Roden. The scene was set for an extraordinary legal battle to be played out in Waco's McLennan County District Court.

The shoot-out was the last straw for George Roden, finally tipping him into insanity. The attempt by the local tax authorities to seize control of his land led him to file an unusual writ against them in the Texas Supreme Court. The writ asked the court to reduce the tax bill to $5,696.44. But the language Roden used was far from legalistic:

> What does the Texas Supreme Court think they are, "God"? If you think your [sic] God then God would have taken the poor into account but you sons of bitches have you goddamn click [sic] to take care of don't you. You can't allow the poor to get any benefit or you might lose your ass in the process, you fucking sons of bitches have more than heart could wish you greedy bastards can't stand to see any body else have the priveleges [sic] you shit asses get by just a stroke of your pen and a word of your jutted out mouth.
>
> Maybe God will make it up to you in the end and send you herpes and aids the seven last plagues and shove them up your goddamn bastards asses.

Roden filed several other writs, penned in the same inimitable fashion. Finally, just two weeks before he was due to appear as the chief prosecution witness in the Howell attempted murder case, a federal judge in Waco jailed him for six months for contempt of court.

With Roden languishing inside McLennan County Jail, Vernon Howell seized his chance. The Branch Davidians from the Palestine camp drove up to the Mount Carmel Center and settled in, lock, stock and barrel. The wording on the

sign at the front of the property was changed back to read "New Mount Carmel Center". Rodenville was no more. Howell and the others celebrated their triumph by arranging with the Chungs to pay back the $68,000 in taxes owed on the property.

When the trial began on April 11, 1988 the Davidians came out in force. Babies, boys, girls and teenagers flocked into the courtroom. The courthouse overflowed. Those who couldn't find room peered in from the corridor. The bailiff called it a kindergarten. He'd never seen babies in the courthouse before. It was a family affair.

On the second floor of Waco's grand nineteenth-century courthouse there was an even stranger sight. A polished wooden casket containing the remains of Anna Hughes lay at rest. Perry and David Jones had driven it into town in an old green Chevrolet van. As a gesture of respect, Howell tied a pink ribbon around the skeleton's neck. Gary Coker, the lawyer defending Howell and the others, told the court he wanted to introduce the coffin as evidence. It was, after all, the reason Howell and the others had gone up to Mount Carmel in the first place. Judge Herman Fitts said no.

The ten-day trial was a straight fight between Roden, who was called from McLennan County Jail to testify, and Howell. It was no contest.

An indication of the way things would go came on the first day when Coker walked to the railing and asked potential witnesses to stand. No one moved. Howell, looking well-scrubbed in a suit, shoulder-length hair and wire-rimmed glasses, stood up next to Coker. "It's all right, you've done nothing wrong," the Prophet said, raising a hand to his people. "Stand." The witnesses rose in unison.

The prosecution alleged that Howell had gone to Mount Carmel with the intent to kill George Roden – it was the only way to get him off the property. Coker replied that his clients had intended to get photographic evidence of the corpse at the request of the Sheriff. They had gone armed in self-

defence. The court heard that the two men had had an armed confrontation once before. In 1984, Howell and several others from the Palestine camp had driven onto the property in an old school bus. All the women and children, including Rachel and Michele Jones and Robyn Bunds, were hidden on the floor of the vehicle. The bus trip seemed to have been the first bid by Howell to retake the property.

According to Roden, Howell "had threatened that he was going to bring his streetfighters from Boston and ... throw my ass off the property". Roden had put his hand up for them to stop as they came barrelling through the gate. Clive Doyle, the driver, ignored him. So Roden opened fire with his machine-gun, shooting all the tyres out. "Would it bother you if terrorists were coming after you?" Roden asked Coker. "I could have shot the driver. I guess a good commando would have shot the driver."

The jury also heard that Roden had filed a lawsuit accusing Howell of abusing Lois Roden. Coker read it to the court:

> Can that goddamn rapist, Vernon W. Howell, in the name of religion and Charles Pace that goddamn fornicating Bastard with him, in conspiracy to destroy Mrs Lois Roden get away with such outrageous atrocities in the name of religion and get away with it, or since it is a religious matter, is the Court going to turn it over to my hands to execute judgement on the son-of-a-bitching bastards raping and killing and torturing my precious mother and for especially dispensing illicit drugs without having a license to practise medicine in the United States. In Texas?

Roden claimed that Howell had delivered a death decree on Lois for telling others he had raped her. He also claimed Howell had issued a similar decree on himself and his sister for demanding that Howell marry her.

The jury was told many other strange things about the prosecution's chief witness. They heard how he had nomi-

nated himself for the Democratic candidacy for the President of the United States. It heard how he had filed another legal document, a will, in which he supposedly granted parts of the State of Israel to his sons or the sons of the people. It heard Roden describe his occupations: "I head up a charitable organisation, I'm a minister, I'm a Presidential candidate, I'm a truck driver, I'm a farmer and just about jack-of-all-trades." It heard him say that he had helped build the first vegetarian village in the Sea of Galilee in Israel. The jury listened to him declare that he hated Vernon Howell. It heard him claim that Howell had taught him how to be a polygamist. It heard Roden say that he could cure Aids. The members of the jury heard him call Coker the Devil's advocate. Finally, they heard him say he was the Son of Christ. When Coker asked him if he was the Messiah, he replied, "Thou saith it."

Conversely, Howell came across as a simple, kind and ultimately peaceful man. Unlike Roden, he didn't think he was Jesus Christ. He didn't call himself a prophet, although that is what he allowed his disciples to call him. His followers clearly believed that God had chosen him to reveal the Revelations to them.

The jurors took the weekend to decide. When their verdict came through, they acquitted the seven other defendants of attempted murder. They voted nine to three in favour of acquitting Howell. Since the verdict on Howell was not unanimous, the judge ordered a mistrial.

The charge of attempted murder against Vernon Howell was finally dropped on November 4, 1988. Three days later the Sheriff's office was ordered to return Howell's arsenal of weapons and ammunition.

The case was a triumph for Coker. He had used what the prosecution called the "rabid dog defence" to good advantage: he had presented George Roden as so unstable that any attempt to shoot at him might be understandable. Summing up, Coker had told the jury:

> These people are not violent people. They work, they farm, they pray a lot. They may have wanted the Sheriff's department to arrest George so they could peacefully retake their land, but it was because they didn't want to confront him. These people aren't used to fighting. They may be unusual, they may be different in their beliefs, but at least they're peaceful and don't mean to harm anybody.

Later that month Howell took Coker and his family out and bought them a sumptuous dinner. George Roden would later be confined to a Texas state mental hospital, charged with killing a man from Odessa.

In the aftermath nobody took much note of the warnings about Vernon Howell given during the trial by the failed prosecution team. Speaking of Howell and his fellow defendants, El-hadi Shabazz, the Chief State Prosecutor, had told the court, "They've got to shoot somebody. They've got to target their hate at somebody. If they get rid of George Roden, somebody else will be the target of their hatred." It was not long before those words were to prove chillingly prophetic.

6

The House of David

It took David Koresh just four years to transform an isolated, idiosyncratic and peace-loving religious community into a dangerous, paramilitary and ultimately criminal group which tolerated his sexual depravity and succumbed to his every wish. But how did Vernon Wayne Howell, a semi-literate ninth-grade drop-out and failed rock guitarist, become David Koresh, pathological killer and child molester, hell-bent on mass destruction? How did he persuade 100 of his disciples, many of them grown men and women, to submit to his total dominion? Why did they allow him to undermine their human rights, subjecting them to slavery and sexual abuse?

What force was at work? Was it some psychopathology which clinical experts could recognise? Was it evil? America's most senior law enforcement officials would struggle to find the answers. When the Waco fire had burnt itself out, these would be the questions that still smouldered.

The cult leader's triumph in the Waco State Court in 1988 was more than a victory over George Roden. It was a triumph over the system. The mistrial verdict demonstrated to Howell and his followers that he was untouchable. Four years after being cast out into the wilderness, the Messiah had returned victorious to Mount Carmel. His chief enemy and rival had been vanquished and was now languishing in prison. His people were fully behind him. Suddenly, David Koresh found himself in a position of total control. There was no-one to challenge him. No-one to confute him. He had absolute power; and absolute power now began to corrupt him.

David Koresh began to dominate life at Mount Carmel. He would soon control everything his followers did. He became brutally uncompromising in punishing those who broke his rules. Discipline and control became his bywords.

In the unrelenting quest for total domination of his flock, Koresh developed his most effective psychological weapon: he broke the human bonds that tied his followers together. Koresh recruited whole families to Waco, but within days of their arrival, he began tearing them apart. This manipulative dismantling of human relationships would become one of the most pervasive and corrosive features of life at Ranch Apocalypse. Husbands were separated from their wives. Children were split up from their parents. Brothers were taken from their sisters.

The most pressing question about the Waco tragedy, the key to understanding the disaster, is how Koresh systematically destroyed family relationships and redirected the residual emotions towards one person: himself. The failure of the Attorney General and of the Director of the FBI to understand this process helps explain their subsequent mishandling of the crisis.

Life at Ranch Apocalypse soon became strictly regimented. There had, of course, been more than a modicum of discipline at the Palestine camp; the spartan conditions had required it. Koresh exploited the move to a more commodious home by imposing a host of new rules. He made sure they worked to his personal advantage.

As soon as the Davidians moved back into Mount Carmel, Koresh set about dispossessing and then dismantling the families. First he would instruct new members to sell all their assets and give the money to him. Bruce Gent, an Australian who had moved to the Palestine camp with his wife Elizabeth (also known as Lisa) in December 1986, sold his house and all his possessions. "Because we believed that Vernon's teachings at that time were biblical and true," Gent said, "we gave a

tithe of twelve thousand Australian dollars to Vernon for the support of the Message. He was angry at this amount, claiming that we should have given him a full third of our assets."

Once Koresh had drawn the disciples into his web, he implemented his philosophy of divide and rule. He ordered the men to live and sleep in the ground-floor rooms. He told the women and mothers with small children to sleep on the first floor. Koresh moved into the largest bedroom and installed electricity and air conditioning. Conveniently, his room was with the women on the first floor.

Under the new regime, adulthood began at an early age. Boys of twelve and above were given apprenticeships. One twelve-year-old boy released in the first week of the siege told psychiatrists he was training to be an electrician. The twelve-year-old rule had a sinister side. The girls, too, became adults. Even before they became teenagers, they were, by David Koresh's perverse logic, mature enough for sex.

In keeping with his treatment of adults, Koresh dictated that girls and boys should have separate activities during the day and rarely spend much time together.

There was some concession to the traditional concept of family. Mothers could live with their small children in a single room with beds and a desk. But in large families, or in families where siblings didn't seem to get along, brothers and sisters would be forced to live with other children of the same sex. The cult leader ensured that the separate living and sleeping arrangements were strictly enforced. He regularly inspected bedrooms throughout the compound.

As time went by, Koresh began ruthlessly to exploit these divisions. By mid-1989 he had become the self-styled father-figure of all the children, the self-proclaimed husband of all the women. The cult leader laid down the law. He believed he was the law. He became the source of all information about the outside world. Slowly, he became the Provider: the source of knowledge, the source of discipline, the source of food, and the source of sex. Koresh became the focal point of

the community – the hub at the centre of the Mount Carmel wheel.

The orchestrated destruction of family ties had a darker side. Children were told to address Koresh as their father. Conversely, they had to call their natural parents "dogs". Youngsters who were neither fathered nor adopted by Koresh were stigmatised as bastards. Outsiders from beyond the compound's walls were evil. Koresh encouraged his followers to label them "unbelievers without light". They were the Babylonians, the Assyrians. Koresh saw them as the Devil incarnate.

The cult leader's views on food and hygiene were equally primitive and outlandish. In keeping with the 27 fundamental beliefs of the Seventh Day Adventists, pork was forbidden. But so was chocolate – except for Koresh. Luxuries such as red meat, sweets and fizzy drinks were rare. There was no hot food. Women were sometimes restricted to a diet of fruit and popcorn; Koresh told them this was necessary to "keep them thin". On other days only vegetables would be allowed.

The cult leader used food as a means of punishment and discipline. Those who broke the rules were ordered not to eat for one or two days, depending on the gravity of their crime. On a whim, certain residents would be subjected to a juice fast. Sometimes the leader imposed starch-free diets. During April 1989 bananas were the only fruit to be eaten. Another strict rule dictated that nobody could eat oranges and grapes at the same meal. They were, however, allowed oranges and raisins. If sect members thought this odd, none was brave enough to challenge Koresh's caprice.

Such dietary regimes were imposed without rhyme or reason. The cult leader prohibited anyone from buying food for themselves, no matter what the reason, without his permission. Only the Mount Carmel Association, the official cult body over which Koresh had total control, could buy food – and then only on David's personal orders. For example, Ian Manning, a cult member from Melbourne, was one of several

residents prevented from eating during the three-day trip by car from the cult's satellite residence in California to Waco.

At the ranch, everyone ate in the dining room. One day lunch and dinner would be chicken or stew. The next, nothing but popcorn. Koresh allowed his followers to buy chicken hot dogs, but when they came back with chicken bologna, he would burst into a rage. Draconian bans on sugar and ice cream were imposed one day, and suddenly reversed the next. The Messiah, of course, could have as much ice cream as he wished.

As a result, many group members became malnourished and prone to sickness and disease. During their rare trips into Waco, cult members could be seen in convenience stores, wolfing down large quantities of packaged cheese. Few Davidians dared admit it, but by 1989 there was a hint of the concentration camp about life at Mount Carmel.

Conditions around the compound were insanitary, exposing residents to the constant risk of illness and infection. There were few modern amenities. The lack of plumbing meant cult members lived without hot and cold running water. There were no toilets. The Davidians used pots in which to urinate and defecate. The contents were emptied each day.

Marc Breault, the former cult member who left in August 1989, recalled that raw sewage was simply buried in the ground, wherever there was room. "When people carried their excrement to be buried," Breault said in a sworn statement, "it would sometimes spill out of the bucket and fall unburied on the ground."

While many of the cult's neighbours relied on wells as a source of water, the Mount Carmel well remained dry and out of use. Water was brought in from outside in a large yellow container carried on the back of a flat-bed truck. The tank became the source of all drinking, cooking and bathing water, but it was rarely cleaned. Eventually, the yellow container became so encrusted with algae that Koresh stopped residents

drawing its water. He didn't want them to see the filth they were drinking.

In medical matters, Koresh claimed a divine competence. Accordingly, his disciples received inadequate health care. One cult member had hepatitis B, a highly contagious liver disease. Nothing was done to prevent him infecting others.

In the early period after the 1988 coup, children still went to school. One day, according to Marc Breault, they brought back lice. Both Sherri Jewell, one of the cult leader's teenage wives, and Kiri, her daughter, were badly affected. With no running water Kiri suffered for more than a year with no attempt at a cure being made.

Somebody was always ill. Disease spread easily in the dining hall where food was prepared in unhygienic conditions. Nobody ever wore hairnets or gloves when preparing the food. Lack of medical care became a subtle form of physical abuse. In its place Koresh substituted his own form of quackery.

Allison Manning, a young Australian woman who joined the cult with her future husband Ian in 1989, described how she once went to Waco to see a doctor after complaining of a fever. The doctor found a high level of ketones in her urine, indicating that Manning's body fat was being used for energy. In other words, she had malnutrition. The doctor ordered her to return for treatment in two days' time. When Manning got back to the ranch, Koresh rebuked her for failing to consult him.

"Vernon scolded me for going to the doctor in the first place," she recalled. "He said I should have trusted in the Prophet, as he then called himself (this was before he became Jesus and the Lamb, etc.), to tell me what to do. He wouldn't let me get the medication or go back to the doctor. Instead, he told me to drink a quart of prune juice and fast for a day or so." The cult leader appeared to feel that conventional medicine posed a threat to his reign of terror.

In keeping with the primitive living conditions, there was no central heating at Mount Carmel. Indeed, there was hardly

any heating at all. Firewood was almost impossible to get. At one stage Koresh forbade anyone to buy firewood from shops. The bitter Texan winter nights were consequently an ordeal.

The austerity might have seemed appropriate to the ascetic lifestyle to be expected of a prophet and his disciples. Self-denial had always been an important part of the Adventists' creed. Koresh saw it as a holy poverty. But the spartan existence was accompanied by an evolving paramilitary discipline which was imposed by the cult leader on all the men, women and children.

Koresh ran the men's lives in military fashion – as if they were a guerilla army preparing for war. Men and boys got up at 5.30am. The men took up guard duty, constructing weapons or stockpiling the arsenal. The boys went to "gym", during which they would practise military drill, marching with firearms.

Koresh instilled a deep-seated mistrust of outsiders in the minds of his followers. Sometimes this produced moments of farce. Early one morning in 1988 Wally Kennett, one of Koresh's most trusted followers, was standing guard at the front gate. It was still dark and Kennett could make out the silhouette of an intruder approaching his position. Without warning Kennett opened fire, only to discover that he had shot at the newspaper delivery man. The newspaper man cried out, "Holy shit, don't shoot. Please, don't shoot," and then fled in panic.

Later that day, Koresh received a telephone call from the newspaper's management saying it would no longer deliver to the property. The incident convinced Marc Breault that there were just too many weapons about. "The firearm[s] situation within the group is a serious accident waiting to happen," he wrote in his diary.

The cult leader's reaction was significant. Instead of scaling down the state of armed readiness to prevent further accidents, he became convinced of the need to take extra military-style precautions.

It was in May 1989, about a year after the incident with the

newspaper man, that Koresh first hit on the idea of military-type physical training. The concept chimed in well with the cult leader's growing conviction that his followers needed to prepare for the Advent. Only David Koresh's Advent was different. Imperceptibly, he began to change the Davidian doctrine by superimposing his own evolving belief in a violent confrontation with the outside world onto the traditional Adventist faith in the Apocalypse.

In line with the new doctrine, Koresh regularly preached against law enforcement officials. He taught that when the confrontation finally occurred his followers should "resist with arms ... be ready to fight and resist." Whenever his disciples asked about the huge firearms cache hidden in the music room near his first-floor bedroom, Koresh told them it was there for use against "the police". All the adults were issued with weapons, which they were instructed to keep by their beds at night. Everyone but the elderly and children was to be ready to fight. Their specific instructions were to shoot and kill any intruders.

Koresh saw potent symbolic parallels between the cult's increasingly isolated predicament and the condition of American soldiers fighting during the Vietnam war. Both groups were paramilitary armies, surrounded by enemies, waiting for battle behind enemy lines. Koresh enjoyed the Vietnam war videos which showed the rigours and the dangers of life in the Marines. He seemed to get a special thrill from the most violent scenes, showing scores of Marines being blown up or shot to pieces. The films were all "R" rated, restricted by the American censors to adults, but David Koresh made even the youngest children watch them over and over again.

The cult leader also picked up on the marching songs, sung at great length during the Marine training exercises shown in the films. The songs were adapted by the group for propaganda purposes, their lyrics altered to incorporate the new Branch Davidian doctrines. Sherri Jewell and Jaydean Wendel, two of Koresh's most loyal female disciples, com-

posed new verses to the tunes, adding liberal references to Davidian doctrine. The new words referred to killing the "Babylonians".

Wendel and Jewell were fanatical Koresh disciples. When the cult leader declared that everybody needed physical training, they volunteered themselves as drill sergeants, leading all the females, including young girls, on forced marches and runs. The marches began at 5.30am and were repeated twice more through the day.

One former cult member recalled, "Sherri or Jaydean would call out one line, and the rest would answer, just as a drill sergeant does in military boot camp." The men exercised only once, also in the early morning. Strangely, there were no Marine-style chants for them. Perhaps Koresh didn't want them to develop too powerful a sense of military unity. The men spent the days fortifying the compound and digging a network of underground bunkers and tunnels.

The paramilitary-style training continued into the summer of 1989, when the temperature on the Texas prairie often rose above 100 degrees. The trainees, particularly the women, suffered because of yet another bizarre Koresh theory. The cult leader believed it was a sign of inner strength to resist drinking water during drill. As a result, many group members suffered severe dehydration.

Koresh tailored the children's play-time to his developing focus on the paramilitary. Television and children's videos were banned. Instead, their imaginations were fuelled by a diet of war movies and films about martial arts.

Older children rode the go-carts and dune-buggies scattered throughout the 77-acre compound, but traditional sports such as baseball, basketball, tag and American football – the staple diet of millions of ordinary American kids – were strictly prohibited. Instead of tag, or hide and seek, the adults encouraged the children to play Cowboys and Indians or other confrontational games.

Several children who were released in the days after the

bungled ATF raid remembered being encouraged by Koresh and the other adults to fight each other. If the children didn't join in or participate with sufficient enthusiasm, they were disciplined, often by being beaten or denied food for a day.

There was some light relief from this strict regime. Like an overgrown adolescent, Koresh was convinced he had within him the makings of a great rock star. He formed a band and would often practise strumming his electric guitar in the early hours of the morning. His disciples found it difficult to practise with him. Koresh threw violent tantrums whenever he hit a wrong note in front of the others. "Its very difficult being in a band with God's messenger," remarked Breault.

As time went on, Koresh became determined to exercise absolute control over his followers. He grew violent and abusive, especially towards women he had tired of, or men who challenged his orders. But in this megalomania the cult leader ultimately sowed the seeds of his own destruction. His autocratic style of governance, the unending repression and punishment, prompted the departure of several important cult members, including Robyn Bunds and Marc Breault. After falling out with Koresh as he became power crazy, they took their grievances to the police. Their testimony helped convince the federal authorities of the need to intervene.

In the years before Koresh challenged George Roden for power in 1987, he had seemed much like the tens of thousands of other members of cults in America. A high-school drop-out who took to the road in search of true religion, his hippie lifestyle reflected a profound alienation from the mainstream of American society. His early rebellion was, however, tempered by a genuine belief in a Christian God.

Marc Breault, a cult member from January 1986 to August 1989, recalled: "At first Vernon Howell [David Koresh] appeared to be a conservative person whose only wish was to

reform the Seventh Day Adventist Church. As time progressed, however, [he] became power hungry and abusive, bent on obtaining and exercising absolute power and authority over the group."

The shift took time and at first it crept up on the cult members almost unnoticed. But by mid-1989 there was no mistaking it. Koresh had seen the light. He had also become a tyrant.

The cult leader's vicious use of physical discipline illustrated his corrupt concept of power. When doctors at the Texas Children's Hospital in Houston examined the 21 children who were released during the first days after the failed ATF raid, they discovered alarming evidence. Several of the young girls had wounds. Their lesions were round, about one inch wide, located at the top of their buttocks and the base of their spines. The wounds were recent and still healing when the children were examined in Houston during the first week of March 1993. (This evidence was almost certainly the basis for the later comments by President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno that child abuse went on during the siege. The explanation for the apparent conflict between the accounts given by Clinton and Reno – that child abuse continued and was therefore the main reason for the FBI going in – and the FBI's own account that they had no concrete evidence of child abuse during the siege almost certainly lies here. The question of whether the injuries were inflicted before or shortly after the February 28 ATF raid may have been the source of the confusion, but given the clear evidence of physical abuse it seems a moot point.)

At first the young girls said their wounds had been caused by "falling down", but within days one of the girls revealed their true cause. The large welts were the result of being "paddled" by a flat piece of wood. Koresh sickeningly called it the "Helper", his version of the British cane. Some children described it as the end of a paddle. Others said it was like a large wooden spoon. Whatever it was, the "Helper" quite

literally struck the fear of God into the hearts of the children. The words "IT IS WRITTEN" were inscribed on the wood, as if corporal punishment had a basis in divine prophecy.

Koresh and other adults used the paddle to mete out punishment in liberal doses. A special room, dubbed the Spanking Room, was exclusively set aside for this purpose.

The smallest breach of compound discipline brought instant retribution. The "Helper" was even used on children who declined to participate in the staged fights.

From an early age, children were repeatedly subjected to this brutal form of punishment. Even spilling milk was punishable by beating. Some ex-cult members told the *Waco Tribune-Herald* that Koresh taught that kids as young as eight months must be whipped and beaten. Two women who left before the siege said Koresh had hit their babies until their bottoms bled.

Allison Manning saw it happen dozens of times:

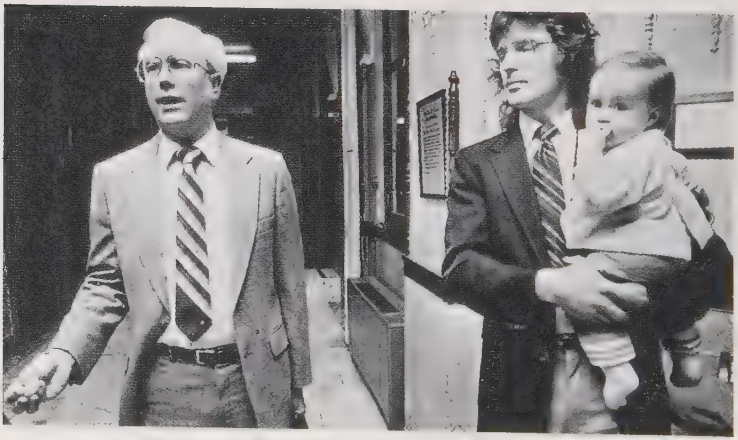
> Vernon demands a very hard method of disciplining children and adults, beginning when they are only eight months old. If the child continues crying after being initially spanked, the child is most likely to be spanked further. I remember an occasion when the force of bringing the paddle down on an eighteen-month-old child's bottom was enough that I felt the breeze blow on my face. Children's buttocks and thighs are regularly severely bruised and sometimes caused to bleed.

Koresh beat his own son Cyrus repeatedly with the paddle. He encouraged mothers to beat their young children, telling them they would burn in hell if they refused. On one occasion Koresh threatened to beat Kiri Jewell because she could not interpret a verse in Revelations.

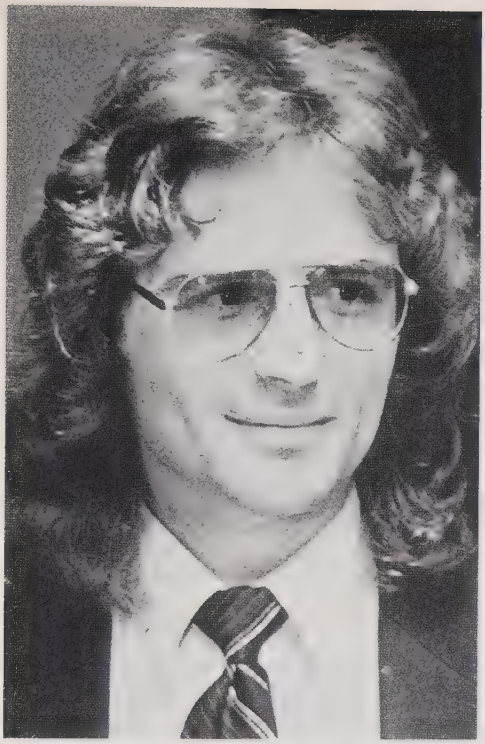
In another form of punishment, young offenders would be forced down into a pit of raw sewage. When they emerged, they were not allowed to bathe.

Fire destroys the Branch Davidian compound at Waco, April 19, 1993

David Koresh with his wife Rachel and their son Cyrus in San Bernardino, California, 1986



The cult leader with his daughter Star and lawyer Gary Coker, Waco, 1987



Left: David Koresh in Waco during his 1988 court appearance for attempted murder.

Below: Robyn Bunds and other cult members peering into the courtroom during the trial

George Roden, son of the Branch Davidian founder, in 1988

Cult members after David Koresh was found not guilty of attempted murder in 1988

Steven Schneider, Koresh's right-hand man, (left) with a friend at the Palestine camp, 1987

Aerial view of the Mount Carmel compound before the siege, December 1992

Agents from the ATF carry a wounded colleague to safety during the raid of February 28, 1993

Above: An ATF agent comforts a badly wounded colleague after the shoot-out, February 28, 1993

A young girl released from the compound being taken to a protected area, March 1, 1993

Police gather during the siege at the Mount Carmel compound, March 2, 1993

Right: An FBI helicopter hovers overhead as the fire takes hold, April 19, 1993

While the fire burned, 24 cult members, including Koresh, were shot inside.

Cult member David Thibodeaux who survived the fire, April 20, 1993

Cult survivors Jaime Castillo, Derek Lovelock and David Thibodeaux under prison escort, April 20, 1993

When Texas Children's Hospital psychiatrists debriefed the 21 children freed at the start of the siege, they uncovered hints of even darker secrets. In interviews several youngsters spoke repeatedly of dead babies. Some said the bodies of dead babies were placed in a freezer until they could be otherwise disposed of. Dr Bruce Perry, head of the hospital team, reported: "There was an on-going secretive quality to these occasional allusions to births, dead babies, miscarriages, storage of dead babies in the freezer, burning bodies, a ceremony with a male baby underwater and other incomplete and unformed stories." There is a hint here of something far more terrible than has so far emerged about life at Ranch Apocalypse. In the light of Koresh's credo that only he could procreate, it suggests that he may have murdered other cult members' babies.

Two reliable ex-residents spoke of their fears that Koresh advocated ritual child murder. Bruce Gent, the Australian who joined the cult with his wife Elizabeth in 1986, stated in an affidavit sworn in March 1990 in a bid to warn the authorities about the dangers at Mount Carmel:

> Having personally observed Vernon's changing personality and moods, I am extremely concerned for the safety of my daughter Nicole and her twin brother Peter, who are still with Vernon, and am most particularly fearful for the safety of my grandchild, Dayland, as I am aware of repeated attempts by Vernon to convince his followers that it is necessary for him to make the sacrifice of a child or children.

Marc Breault, in a newspaper interview after the Waco fire, also spoke of his concern that Koresh wanted to sacrifice children.

When any of the 21 released youngsters began talking about such matters, other children put peer pressure on them not to disclose more. Their stories may yet yield further

horrifying evidence of ritualistic child abuse at the Waco ranch.

David Koresh's motives for imposing harsh discipline were not merely sadistic. He also exploited his control over the other cult members to his own sexual advantage. The testimony of dozens of former cult members is remarkably consistent about this. Koresh, the educationally sub-normal high-school failure, was also an unrelenting and sophisticated sexual predator. A perverse psychological cocktail of violence, religion and sex drove him to prey on the youngest of girls. The cult leader's paedophilia went back at least to 1986, and may well have predated his involvement with the Branch Davidians. As early as April that year, when he was leading about twenty followers living in the ramshackle camp in Palestine, he candidly admitted having sex with Karen Doyle, then just thirteen or fourteen years old. Koresh claimed he was simply fulfilling biblical prophecy.

He informed the group he had been approached by God and told, "Give seed to Karen." Koresh said that when he received this divine instruction he approached Karen Doyle and informed her of the message. Karen, he claimed, replied that she would do whatever God asked.

Karen's father, Clive Doyle, was in Australia during this time, and reportedly had no idea what was going on. It is not clear exactly when Clive Doyle discovered the truth about David Koresh and his daughter. But the disclosure did not appear to trouble him that much. Although Karen left the cult long before the ATF raid, Clive Doyle stayed with Koresh until the very end. He was one of nine cult members to survive the fire.

Koresh could not defend his paedophilia by pretending that Karen seemed older than she was. In fact, Karen Doyle was frail and innocent. According to Lisa Gent, another cult member, Karen Doyle had the voice of a much younger girl. Koresh came up with a biblical justification for his

perversion. The cult leader claimed that he and Karen would father a daughter called Shoshonna. Their child would then marry Koresh's son Cyrus and the couple would rule in God's kingdom.

Once Koresh saw how his followers acquiesced in his sexual relations with young girls, his appetite was unleashed. Early the following summer Koresh started having sex with Michele Jones. Koresh had married Michele's older sister Rachel in 1984 when she was fourteen. He figured that at twelve, Michele was old enough for him. Dick DeGuerin, Koresh's lawyer, and other supporters have since denied these allegations, but the evidence comes from many sources, and has been tested in court.

Marc Breault recalled how in May or June of 1987 he saw Koresh leaving a bedroom where Michele Jones was sleeping in the cult's house in La Verne. It was 5.30am in the morning and Breault saw Koresh coming from Michele's room with just pants on. Michele's father Perry was a leading cult member based at the ranch in Texas. Until he was killed in the ATF raid on February 28, 1993, Jones was effectively second-in-command. Like Doyle, Jones apparently acquiesced in the cult leader's claim upon his daughter.

Koresh was an immature egomaniac who frequently boasted of the women and girls he had slept with. He once took Breault aside and told him he was having women troubles: "He said it wasn't easy having all these women. He asked me to guess who his favourite 'wife' was. I guessed Rachel Howell or Sherri Jewell. [Koresh] said I was wrong. He said that his favourite 'wife' was Michele Jones and that he had been with her since she was twelve years old. 'Can you believe it, Marc, She [Michele] has been with me since she was twelve years old?'"

Koresh often told his disciples about his first time with Michele. One night the cult leader went to see the young girl. He climbed into her bed. "Michele was under the impression that Vernon was just trying to 'get warm'," Allison Manning

said. "She was shocked when he tried to remove her underpants and she resisted, repeatedly trying to hold them up while he pulled them down. This indicated not only the level of his own perversion, but also the degree of control he holds over his followers."

In February 1988, when she was fourteen, Michele gave birth to a child, Serenity Sea. Koresh was the father. The cult leader felt guilty about his secret love child. He instructed Michele's mother, Mary Bell Jones, to hide the baby in case anyone saw it. Michele and her daughter would later perish in the Waco fire.

That summer, Koresh gave a Bible studies class based on the Song of Solomon. During this session he claimed he was entitled to 140 wives, comprising 60 "proper" wives and 80 concubines. By October one of these was Sherri Jewell, the estranged wife of David Jewell, a Michigan disc jockey, and mother of Kiri. Sherri Jewell would pay for her relationship with the cult leader. She also died five years later, aged just 23, as the FBI moved in.

Both Sherri and another young woman, Dana Okimoto, were in the House of David, the expression used by Koresh to describe members of his harem. "Sherri told me she was in love with [Koresh] and that she had become one of his wives," Breault recalled.

By the following year Koresh had co-opted Robyn Bunds into his growing harem. He would sleep with Bunds, Jewell, Okimoto and his legal wife Rachel on alternate nights. The harem would travel across America with him. Sometimes they would drive 1,600 miles to the house in La Verne, California. Other times, they'd take the Farm Road for the short trip into Waco. Koresh rented a house on 19th Street where he kept some of his musical equipment. Wherever they travelled, Koresh ensured he had a regular supply of willing female cult members to sleep with.

At the La Verne house, Koresh would often sleep on the floor of his bedroom with three females, Sherri Jewell, Lisa

Farris and the young Kiri Jewell, around him. One day, Sherri and Lisa saw that Nicole Gent, another member of the "House of David", was depressed. Koresh claimed the women encouraged him to move from the floor to the bed, where Nicole was sleeping, so he could be with her. The cult leader would sometimes recall this story as evidence that some of his wives wished to encourage him to make love to others. This demonstrated, he said, that the Holy Spirit was with the "wives".

Koresh also used sexual humiliation as a weapon. Allison Manning recalled an incident during one of the interminable lectures at Ranch Apocalypse: "Public humiliation is one of those tactics he uses most frequently. I was present when one such instance occurred. Vernon called Judy Schneider to the front of the meeting and instructed her to pull her dress above her buttocks revealing her underwear to the men, women and children present. This appeared quite embarrassing to her, as she always displays a most conservative manner. While she stood in the front with her dress up, Vernon asked the men to put their hands up if they felt the urge to go to bed with her. Several of them raised their hands (none of the men but Vernon, including her own husband, are allowed to have sex at all)."

The culture of Koresh's sexual tyranny affected even the youngest girls. The Texan psychiatrists who debriefed the children freed from the siege in February 1993 were astonished by the range of suggestive sexual remarks made by many of the older girls. They stated that Bible studies were used by Koresh as an opportunity to make graphic sexual comments. These comments were, in the view of Dr Perry and his team of experts, "unhealthy, malignant and predatory". Koresh appears to have encouraged the women in his camp, particularly the girls aged from twelve to sixteen, associate power with sex. Dr Perry, analysing the attitudes of some of the Mount Carmel children, wrote: "The young girls ... were exposed to inappropriate sexual ideations and possible sexual behaviour. Associations between sexuality and religion

and power are present in a malignant form and permeate the thoughts and comments of the older girls."

One child recalled her father reading bedtime stories involving sex between humans and animals including chickens, dogs and horses. "She described being told about beheading a chicken and inserting [it] into the vagina," Dr Perry noted in his study. Like the stories of dead babies in the freezer, such accounts can only hint at the darker secrets harboured by the Davidian children.

Koresh's cruelty extended even to his own son, Cyrus, who had been born to Rachel Howell at the Palestine camp in 1985. Koresh had named his son after the latter-day King in the Bible who would lead God's people until the Second Coming of Christ. The cult leader believed that he himself was Cyrus, Cyrus being the Hebrew equivalent of Koresh. As the son of the self-styled son of God, Cyrus Howell (he retained Koresh's original surname) was singled out for special treatment and received special favours. But whenever Cyrus misbehaved, Koresh dealt out draconian punishment.

Once, while at the California house, Koresh had demanded that Cyrus call Nicole Gent his mother, but he refused. Nicole was the latest addition to Koresh's harem and the three-year-old was understandably confused. Koresh forced his son to sleep on the hard kitchen floor with just a thin blanket to keep warm.

The following evening, the punishment became truly sadistic. Koresh told Cyrus that unless he relented, he would have to sleep in the garage. "Vernon emphasised to the little child that there were large rats in the garage and that they would eat him because he had been naughty," Breault recalled. "The child was absolutely terrified and began begging to be allowed to stay in the house."

A few days after the rats-in-the-garage affair, Koresh asked Cyrus whether he liked his father. Not surprisingly, the child was still shaken by the talk of rats and replied no. Breault took up the story: "Vernon was enraged and beat his son

severely. He then asked his son again if he liked him [Vernon]. Once again the child replied that he did not. Vernon continued to beat the child until Cyrus finally said he loved his daddy. These and other incidents prompted me to begin planning my escape. I took Cyrus in hand and used to sneak out with him and some of the other guys and we would play ball in the park. Cyrus enjoyed those times very much."

Bruce Gent, the Australian who for a while served as the cult's Head of Security, recalled another episode when the sect leader beat his own son: "On one occasion, when we were in the church, Vernon went repeatedly back to his bus to beat his son Cyrus. You could hear Cyrus screaming from the church. This incident went on for over an hour with each trip to the bus for spankings lasting about ten minutes. My opinion from this and other occasions of watching the children is that they are at least in danger of permanent emotional damage."

Cyrus Howell was a beautiful little boy with a beguiling smile hidden beneath straggling blond curls. Apart from those short happy breaks, he lived his life in terror of his father. He perished, along with his mother and father, amid the flames of April 19, 1993.

The child abuse was too much for James Tom, another cult member. When Tom rigorously objected, Koresh shut him up, his iron will unrelenting.

By 1990 this unrelenting pattern of physical, emotional and sexual abuse had become the defining characteristic of life in the House of David. The corrupt fabric of Branch Davidian society was held together by fear, guilt, humiliation and shame.

As he approached his apocalypse, Koresh's concept of religion became increasingly contaminated with violent images of sex and death. His sense of God, projected upon those who followed him, was of a wrathful, revenging Being whose methods and motives were unceasingly punitive and malevolent.

The cult leader may have been semi-literate but his powers of recall had always been formidable. He excelled at reciting lengthy passages verbatim from the Old and New Testaments alike. His Message, idiosyncratic and complex, was based on his own reading of the Books of Prophets and Revelations – an interpretation which would later baffle all of the behavioural scientists and biblical scholars consulted by the FBI during the 51-day siege. The collective assessments of all these experts, including some of the finest academic minds in America, would fail to detect the real direction of the cult leader's thinking.

Koresh himself actively contributed to the colossal misjudgement by deploying a strategy of deception. During the siege he would consistently tell Dick DeGuerin, his lawyer, and the FBI negotiators that he had no intention of bringing about mass suicide. His lawyer and the Bureau believed him, an error which undoubtedly contributed to the final death toll. The FBI in particular failed to grasp the fact that Koresh preached that outsiders should be deceived. It was his view that "Babylon", or "Satan incarnate", had to be deceived and confounded, since they were the enemy. The truth, to adopt Churchill's phrase, could only be protected by a bodyguard of lies.

Allison Manning recalled: "I remember Vernon teaching that Babylon (anyone who is not in the Message) should be deceived to protect the 'truth'."

With hindsight, it is easy to see that Koresh, and many of his followers, were hell-bent on a suicide pact. The "Jonestown syndrome", as the FBI called it, after the suicide of more than 900 followers of Jim Jones in Guyana in 1978, was built into the very core of the new Davidian theology. For Koresh's reading of the Bible yielded a simple, teleological, message: The End is built into the beginning; all life is a journey towards the end.

At the heart of the cult leader's understanding of the End was the New Testament Book of Revelations. Here the end of

the world is depicted in the Apocalypse, a final conflagration of fire and blood which consumes the world and its inhabitants. It had been a long-held view of the Seventh Day Adventists that life must be devoted to preparing for this end, and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ which would follow it.

In Bible studies and at Saturday chapel meetings Koresh preached that the new Messiah was the one who could understand humans. Such understanding could only come from a Christ who, like humans, indulged in sin. This was the theological basis of the cult leader's claim that he was the Prophet. He became the self-styled Sinful Messiah. Since his seed was divine, he had the divine right to procreate when and with whom he wished. It was a libertine's charter.

During his interminable sermons (some continued for as long as fifteen hours) Koresh preached how he had found "new lights". Former group members say such "lights", or readings of the Bible, always referred to Koresh himself. Mostly, they concerned sex. One new "light", which Koresh saw in 1989, was that he could have sex with other men's wives. Another, seen at about the same time, put a ban on procreation by anyone but himself. Marc Breault believes that Koresh first expounded on this new "light" on August 5 1989. That day, Koresh led a Bible study class in which he claimed, for the first time, to be the Lamb of God. As the Lamb he could pick and choose from among the women, whether single or married. Koresh said he would give some married couples time to come to terms with this revelation.

Breault remembered: "At one point during this study, Vernon saw that the married couples were very upset. Howell commanded everyone to look at Sherri Jewell. Sherri was actually quite taken with the study and Howell pointed this out and said Sherri liked this doctrine because she had been sacrificing for years and now it was the married couples' turn to sacrifice. Howell commanded no one tell of this 'new light', as he called it."

Koresh's logic was, of course, flawed. Sherri Jewell had

willingly left her husband David back in Michigan. The couples Koresh wanted to break up had come to the Waco ranch together in the belief that their marriages might be strengthened by joining the cult. The flaw did not stop Sherri Jewell writing a letter to all the group members in Mount Carmel, bitterly condemning those who refused to accept the new doctrine.

What would later baffle outside observers was not so much the bizarre nature of this pseudo-theology, but just how Koresh managed to persuade his followers to accept his creed. Failure to grasp this psychological nettle would eventually undermine the tactic of firing tear gas into the compound.

All the cult members, including the children, were taught that everything, even the lives of the youngest children, could be sacrificed for David Koresh. The children told Dr Perry's psychiatric team that after the cult members died in the final showdown, Koresh would return to kill all the bad people by chopping their heads off. As the bad guys – presumably the ATF and FBI – burned in Hell, the Koreshi children would be reunited with their parents in Heaven.

The children were also taught that a confrontation with the "bad guys" was coming. So when the ATF arrived with their search and arrest warrants on February 28, the cult leader's doctrine and the harsh discipline he had used to enforce it, appeared to be utterly vindicated. After that fateful day, the Davidian leader's concept of apocalypse became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By March 1989, the sexual involvement of David Koresh with young girls had become too much for Marc Breault. The Australian had begun planning his escape after seeing Cyrus Howell being beaten by his father. Now, with fresh evidence of child abuse, his growing disgust at the cult leader's behaviour was difficult to conceal.

The matter reached a head that spring when Koresh informed Breault that the Gyarfas, an Australian family, were

due to visit the group in Waco. Koresh confided that he wanted Aisha Gyarfas, the family's thirteen-year-old daughter, to become one of his "wives". Since Aisha was destined to join the House of David, Koresh thought he should pay for her flight to America. The Gyarfas were not rich, he added.

After the family arrived, Breault decided to set a trap. "I was seriously considering leaving the cult in the summer of 1989 because of what Howell was doing to young girls," he recalled in his affidavit. "But I wanted to make sure." He needed to get enough evidence before he left to allow the authorities to prosecute Koresh and end the abuses.

Breault had seen Aisha going to the cult leader's first-floor bedroom on several evenings. She always left early the next morning. So one night Breault decided to stake out the door to Koresh's room. After he saw Aisha enter he went to the office next door. The only way in and out of the bedroom was via this office, where Breault kept his word processor. Breault stayed there all night, writing letters and playing a *Star Trek* simulation game.

Early the next morning Aisha emerged from Koresh's bedroom. The youngster was surprised to see Breault but she did not challenge him. Later that summer, Breault was in the bedroom practising on the electric keyboards when Aisha came in to collect some of her clothes.

Koresh sometimes confided in Breault his secret feelings for young girls. Breault recalled: "On another occasion, around this time, [Koresh] told me that a lot of people thought that twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls were not ready for sex. Vernon assured me this was incorrect. He said that girls that age were extremely ready for sex and that they were very good in bed. He said they were fast and eager at that age. He used Aisha-Gyarfas as an example."

To outsiders it may have seemed strange that a man who claimed to be so holy should live out a teenage boy's sexual fantasies. But Koresh had an easy answer to anyone within Mount Carmel who dared to question his motives. Because

he was the Sinful Messiah he knew mankind better than the original Jesus Christ, whose virtues had distanced him from ordinary people. Whenever he felt the need to explain his actions, Koresh would address his followers with the ultimate rhetorical question: "Now what better sinner can know a sinner than a godly sinner? Huh?" There was, of course, no answer.

Koresh held sway over his flock by a mixture of easy charm and a ruthless desire to subjugate. His personality was in this sense typical of cult leaders such as Jim Jones who had come before him. He combined the magical power of the charismatic with the dangerous violence of the psychopath. He moulded the isolated Waco community to his own will, binding them together by preaching that everything outside the compound was hostile. He had the uncanny ability to win people's trust. Once he had deprived them of their will, he would set about manipulating them.

With his flowing brown hair, round glasses and hypnotic talk of peace and love, Koresh could draw people in with spellbinding effect. The community he created at Mount Carmel may have been corrupt, but to those who were part of it, life with Koresh somehow seemed meaningful and dynamic. Despite the primitive conditions, members of the close-knit community were persuaded to believe that their lives were in some way better now than the empty, directionless existence they had led before Waco.

Koresh worked his people hard. The harder they worked, the longer they drilled, the less time they had to think. Their days began at dawn. Before he introduced combat training, the men would get up, exercise on an obstacle course and eat breakfast. While they ate, the women began their exercises. Some of the women made a flag. It showed a white unicorn with theological extracts from the scriptures and assorted religious emblems in the background. The flag became a powerful rallying point for the self-governing Branch Davidians.

When Koresh took over the compound from George Roden

in 1988, he found the place in a state of dire disrepair. So the days were devoted to getting the ranch into shape. There was much construction work. Many of the shabby wooden outhouses were torn down. The watertower was turned into a fortified observation post. A network of underground tunnels would provide an escape route or hide-out come the final day. (When the FBI finally made its move, agents found that the tunnels led nowhere and were flooded with raw sewage.) The men also built gun ports in the sides of the compound walls. Their most positive achievement was to build a new chapel, completed in 1991.

The nights were devoted to Bible classes and teaching the "lights" of the new Davidian doctrine. According to some of those who attended, Koresh used these occasions to indoctrinate the group in sex as well as religion. He would spend hours giving his disciples, including little children, graphic descriptions of sexual acts. He talked explicitly about cult members and their sexual peccadilloes. Such behaviour became increasingly obsessive as the years went on.

Allison Manning felt sickened by the graphic sexual content of these "lectures":

> On one occasion he was talking about various sexual positions. Usually the women slept in groups and at bedtime Vernon would choose one for the night. He was jokingly talking about a particular sexual position. He asked the women/girls there if any had been in that position with him. Sherri Jewell was one who raised her hand, and everyone laughed.

Marc Breault remembered another sermon:

> Vernon would describe what he felt to be the difference between the male and female of different races. In Kiri's presence, [he] would describe [her mother] Sherri's sexual habits with him, as well as her genitalia. These studies were

especially sexual in nature in 1989, but sex was always part of Howell's studies. I could even say that when I first met Vernon he was mindful of children's sensitivities in that area but by 1989, he had lost all restraint.

In the early days before Mount Carmel became Ranch Apocalypse, many of the children went to local schools in Waco or Palestine. But during 1988 Koresh barred most of them from going. The next school year he relented. But even then the cult leader called study classes in the afternoons and evenings which left little or no time for homework. For the two and a half years before the end, all formal schooling ceased. It was another way of cutting the children off from the outside world, making them entirely dependent on their "Father" for knowledge.

There was no set time for the Bible classes to begin. Unlike his disciples, Koresh often slept in, sometimes lying in as late as 2pm. Just when the group was getting tired, Koresh would order a lengthy Bible class.

He would sometimes wake the entire compound, ordering them to come to eat and study. Lisa Gent told the *Waco Tribune-Herald*: "On the Night of Atonement, we managed to get to bed at 11pm. At one am Vernon ran through the camp ringing the food bell, making an awful racket. We had to come and eat, as he himself had not had food that night. We then were compelled to study with him until 8am."

During these classes Koresh came into his own. His idiosyncratic brand of theology convinced even educated members of the group that there might be method in his madness. Not all his followers were uneducated. Don Bunds was a design engineer. Marc Breault was taking a Masters in religion. Wayne Martin, one of his closest disciples, was a Harvard-trained lawyer. It was David Koresh's unique ability that he could hold even the more intelligent group members enthralled for hours at a time.

Karl Hennig, a teacher from Vancouver, Canada, visited

the Mount Carmel compound in 1988. He found that Koresh showed a "truly amazing accumulation of knowledge". Their leader gave his disciples the impression they were in the presence of a powerful, all-knowing mind. Often, Koresh would shout out passages from Prophets and Revelations so quickly that it was impossible to grasp their significance. Seemingly disconnected verses from the Bible would suddenly be woven together in a lightning narrative of apocalyptic imagery. Koresh certainly seemed eccentric, but wasn't that in the nature of prophets? Group members persuaded themselves that if they had missed the cult leader's meaning, at least they had had the experience.

As time went on, Koresh would refer more and more in these rants to the coming end. The Mount Carmel Center was renamed Ranch Apocalypse. In the endless stream-of-consciousness monologue which characterised these Bible sessions it was sometimes difficult for cult members to grasp the significance of such references to their imminent demise. Koresh bombarded them with subliminal messages, hinting at an impending symbolic doom. But he rarely spelt out its true meaning.

Once or twice, hints of the approaching conflagration would surface. Steve Schneider, the cult leader's right-hand man, took Breault aside one day and told him: "[Koresh] would have to undergo a test greater than that which Abraham had to endure when God told Abraham to slay his son Isaac. Steve went on to say that [Koresh] told him people would think he was crazy for doing what he was required to do."

Allison Manning described the "control tactics" exercised by Koresh during these meetings. "These extended to basic human rights which were withheld or allowed at Vernon's whim. I have been a reluctant participant in twelve- and fifteen-hour long Bible studies, during which toilet breaks were disapproved. I have seen him striking objects with a boat paddle to emphasise his points in giving a Bible lesson."

By April 1990, in front of 200 people, Koresh was using the

paddle to demonstrate his argument during the sermons. "He beat it on surfaces," Ian Manning remembers, "angrily yelling and screaming at some points during his discourse and then within minutes breaking down and sobbing and crying." Koresh taught that natural disasters such as a fire on nearby Route 7, the violent storms in Texas and the California earthquake were signs from God, angry that people had disobeyed the cult leader's will.

During another lecture Koresh claimed that God had the right to demand that people kill those who turned against His Message. He used scriptures to show how God had demanded of the ancient Israelites that they kill the heathen. He claimed that, today, "if you are not willing to kill for the Message, or in turn to die for it, then you are not worthy of it and will go to Hell and be severely punished by God."

By September 1989 Marc Breault decided he had had enough and left Waco to return to live with his wife Elizabeth in Melbourne. Koresh was furious about Breault's "treachery". He ordered that no one in the group write or telephone the Breaults without his permission.

Later that year the Messiah and his right-hand man Steve Schneider flew to Australia. Schneider rang Breault and made threatening remarks. Breault claims he could hear Koresh in the background, prompting Schneider to say to him he would kill Elizabeth because she was his enemy.

Breault contacted other former cult members in Australia and discovered that they, too, were concerned about Koresh and life on the Waco ranch. They told him that Koresh had drawn up a hit list. Breault's name was at the top. Koresh believed his former confidant had orchestrated a mutiny, persuading other Australian cult members to leave Waco.

Breault remembered: "I was also told that during the time the Australians were following [Koresh], [Koresh] told them that if I came to visit them at their home, they were to open the door, kick me in the balls, and slam the door in my face. Finally, we were told that [Koresh] had sent some of his

followers to spy on us, driving by our home at about two in the morning to see if any Australians who were considering breaking away were, in fact, visiting us."

David Koresh never got to anyone on his hit list. Instead, he turned his desire for revenge upon himself and his community, storing that latent impulse until a fatal catalyst brought about their final destiny.

7

A Prophecy Postponed

One morning in late March 1992 Fred Upton, a Republican Congressman for Michigan, received a two-page letter at his offices in downtown St Joseph. The letter was from David Jewell, the estranged husband of Sherri Jewell, one of Koresh's seventeen wives and the father of Kiri. Jewell had just won a child-custody case and Kiri was now living safely back with her father. The letter contained disturbing news:

> I write to call your attention to an extremely grave situation which begs for action [Jewell began]. It involves a religious cult known as the Branch Davidian Seventh Day Adventists centered at Mount Carmel, near Waco, Texas, with additional property holdings and group memberships in Southern California. I recently won a child custody battle ... against my former wife Sherri L. Jewell based on her exposing our eleven-year-old daughter to the practices of this group ... I am forwarding a copy of an affidavit provided in the case by Marc Breault ...
>
> While the charges raised in the affidavit are absurdly fascinating, they are not the matters of greatest concern to me at this time. During the process of the trial last month it was learned outside the courtroom that the group leader Vernon W. Howell, aka David Koresh, had announced a plan for mass self-destruction if this case went against them.
>
> One group member, Steven Schneider, who accompanied my former wife from California to face the court, told his family (non-members of the cult) that he expected to

do something soon that would result in his own death and that he would probably never speak to them again. We have since heard the same ominous expectations voiced by other sources. One young mother recently fled the group with her babies (fathered by Howell/Koresh) to avoid the holocaust.

My former wife returned to California where she gave virtually the same suicidal message to her close friend. This friend is adamant in her belief that Sherri intends to participate in an act of mass self-destruction within the next few weeks. Though my daughter is safe with me, we are very fearful for the safety of the children of those still under the influence of Howell/Koresh, who may be sacrificed at his command.

Those who know the mind of this man better than I are convinced that he will activate his plan during Passover (some time between now and Easter), and further, that it may involve homicidal actions against "Babylon" (all those outside his fold) prior to turning to self-destruction.

I understand any immediate reaction of scepticism, but in the interest of the children's safety, perhaps this is the time to err on the side of caution. I am convinced that a sincere scrutiny of this group and its leadership will persuade those in authority to do whatever is necessary to avert another Jonestown massacre. I have presented this information to the FBI. They have offered no confirmation of action.

The letter ended with a moving plea from Jewell for Congressman Upton to press for an official inquiry and enlist the support of his Congressional counterparts in California and Texas. "It is the sincerest hope of myself and my friends and family that immediate action will save at least the children," Jewell concluded.

The Jewell letter may have sounded alarmist, but it was only the latest in a long line of warnings about an imminent

disaster at Waco. Many of these warnings were well documented and, in hindsight, would prove uncannily accurate about the impending course of events. They are significant, too, because of the manner in which they signally failed to set the alarm bells ringing among the American authorities. To the likes of Lt Gene Barber, Sheriff of Waco, they were just plaintive cries of siren voices that had drifted away on the prairie wind.

In early 1990, Marc and Elizabeth Breault, Allison and Ian Manning and Bruce and Elizabeth Gent – all ex-Davidians who had returned disappointed to Australia – began a long battle to alert officialdom. Breault hired Geoffrey Hossack, a Melbourne private detective, to start gathering evidence against Koresh.

Another one of those pressing for action was former cult member James Tom, the man who had tried to intervene when Koresh began beating his son Cyrus. Tom was convinced someone would die. "Must we wait for Vernon Howell's followers to take lives?" he asked in 1992.

Armed with a handful of affidavits from the Australians, Hossack flew to Waco in September 1990 for a series of meetings with the local authorities. Those whom he met included officials from the local US Attorney's Office, the Texas Department of Public Safety, responsible for the Texas Rangers, and Lt Gene Barber from the McLennan County Sheriff's Department.

Paul Gartner, the McLennan County District Attorney, recalled finding the Hossack dossier interesting. But "the consensus was there was not enough information at that time to pursue a fullscale investigation," he later told the *Waco Tribune-Herald*.

One problem for the Waco authorities was that Hossack was only presenting them with pieces of paper. The affidavits were worthless without access to those who had signed them. The witnesses, of course, were in Australia. Ralph Strother, then Assistant District Attorney, summed up: "Oh, it got my

attention," he told the *Tribune*. "I could see this sort of thing happening. To tell you the truth the thing that went through my mind is, you've got a cult like Jonestown ... I do not remember ever coming to a determination that this is just a bunch of nonsense and it's not worth my time."

Strother formed the impression that none of the Australian witnesses would come to Waco and repeat their claims. Lt Barber was more cynical. He couldn't understand why the breakaway Australians hadn't reported Koresh to the authorities before they left Texas. "I considered it sour grapes," he told the *Tribune* in an interview 48 hours before the ATF shoot-out. "It doesn't make any sense to me." A disconsolate Hossack flew back to Melbourne in Autumn 1990. "The whole attitude I found there as an investigator was ... it would be safer after the fact – that if a killing or shooting or something came to light, that's when they'd do something, which is generally what I guess police departments there were all about," he said.

Despite the setback, Breault continued his campaign to alert legal officials to the dangers of Koresh. In 1991 he flew to California to investigate the cult's satellite residence at La Verne. There, the Australian met La Verne police sergeant John Hackworth and began telling him about the cult leader's involvement in child abuse. Hackworth knew a little about Koresh from the previous year after a distraught Robyn Bunds had turned up at his police station accusing the Davidian leader of kidnapping their son Shaun. The police had called by and Koresh had later surrendered the child without further argument.

Hackworth told Breault he had picked up some of the child-abuse rumours. He'd heard the story about Koresh having sex with a fourteen-year-old Australian girl. But she was back in Waco. He had been told the story about children being spanked with the paddle. But the allegations were unsubstantiated. He couldn't investigate matters in Waco. They were outside his department's jurisdiction.

The La Verne police did, however, tip off the Texas authorities that allegations were circulating about Koresh having sex with under-age girls.

The Texas Child Protective Services received the complaint on February 26 1992, prompting Joyce Sparks to carry out her first visit to the Mount Carmel compound. But that visit, along with a second inspection a few weeks later, produced no evidence of abuse. Koresh had prevented Sparks from getting access to the children.

Hackworth sensed something was wrong and persisted with his inquiries long after Breault had gone. Later that year the officer traced one of the alleged victims, an under-age girl who had left the cult. The girl confirmed she had been sexually abused by the cult leader. But, again, Koresh was now in Texas, beyond the reach of the La Verne authorities.

"I would have arrested him if he had come out here," Hackworth told the *Washington Post*. "I had enough information to make an arrest, but I don't know if I could have made it to court."

Nonetheless, Hackworth was aware of the ongoing ATF inquiry by Special Agent Davy Aguilera. He passed his information to Aguilera's team in November 1992. The next month, Aguilera started interviewing former cult members.

The ATF had received full details of the child-abuse allegations. Most detailed of all was the affidavit of Jeannine Bunds, Robyn's mother. Her claims that Koresh had fathered at least fifteen children by women and young girls, some as young as twelve, had certainly shocked the Austin field office.

The multitude of different agencies, each with their separate jurisdictions, hindered rather than helped federal inquiries. A tangled web of red tape and long-standing inter-agency jealousies ensured that important warnings continued to be ignored.

The ATF guidelines, for example, stated that when its own agents received allegations of crimes outside its jurisdiction, they should pass them on to the relevant agency, "unless such

action would or could jeopardize an ongoing ATF investigation."

John Killorin, an ATF spokesman, was later forced into an uneasy justification of why the Bureau had kept quiet about the rape of twelve-year-old girls: "As terrible as child abuse is, the most immediate threat to the safety of the children was the production of grenades and explosive materials and the violent attitude at the compound." It was a moot point.

In Australia, the *Melbourne Sun-Times* had begun stirring the Waco pot. In mid-April 1992, Michelle Coffey, a 21-year-old reporter, received a mysterious telephone message from the aunt of Graham Craddock, one of the Waco cult members.

"She left this bizarre message saying she feared her nephew was going to commit suicide, to kill himself in a mass suicide," Coffey recalled. The next day Coffey tracked down the woman, June Craddock. "She told me that Graham had called her from Waco to say goodbye. He told her not to bother sending on his mail as he was going away and wasn't going to come back again. It was as if he was going to die."

June Craddock put Coffey in touch with Marc Breault who gave her alarming news: Koresh had ordered a mass suicide. It was due to take place at Passover in three days' time.

Coffey rang the Waco compound and challenged Koresh. "He was just ranting," she said. "You'd put the phone down to get some coffee and he was still rambling on when you got back." Koresh denied the story about the mass suicide. After much soul-searching Coffey ran the story, the headline emblazoned across the front page: "Cult Plea: Please Don't Die." Passover came and went, but like so many Adventist prophecies, nothing happened at Ranch Apocalypse. Coffey had egg on her face. "Everyone was having a bit of a laugh," she confessed. "They were saying, Michelle, you beat-up merchant."

During her inquiries Coffey had called the *Waco Tribune-Herald* to see if they had heard about a suicide pact. "The

paper rang and asked if we'd heard of a plan by the Davidians to commit mass suicide," *Tribune* reporter Mark England said.

"I rang Howell and he denied it. He said it was all lies by his former followers who wanted to take over the sect. He told me he had changed his name. He said it was because he was a musician. But it sounded phoney to me."

The story might have died there. But Mark England had also located Marc Breault, who told him about the child abuse, adding that Koresh was claiming to be Christ. "In itself the child abuse really didn't move me," said England, "but I rang Howell again and told him that Breault was saying he was claiming to be Christ. He said it was true, he was Christ, if the Bible was true. That really got me going."

England had covered the 1988 trial of Koresh for attempted murder. He had not claimed to be Christ then. "Something had changed. It wasn't just one guy. He had several hundred followers." England went to his editor, Bob Lott. Lott gave him permission to commence a full-scale investigation.

Meanwhile Darlene McCormick, another *Tribune* reporter, had been in to see Sheriff Barber. Barber said he'd had a call from an Australian newspaper about a supposed suicide pact up at the Mount Carmel compound. The Sheriff and his colleagues were all laughing about it. McCormick left the meeting laughing too. Then she stopped and thought: "I'm a journalist. I really ought to be doing something about this."

Back in Melbourne, Coffey's article had stirred official interest. Koresh was not unknown in Australia. He'd been there before and had even played electric guitar for television viewers of Nine Network Australia. The article prompted action by the Australian Attorney General and Gareth Evans, the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Bruce and Elizabeth Gent were getting increasingly worried about their daughter Nicole and her twin brother Peter. They, too, had heard about the suicide pact.

In reply to a letter from Jan Wilson, the Gents' local MP, Foreign Minister Evans wrote: "I am sure you will appreciate

that the role my department can assume in cases where adults are pursuing interests of their own choosing is very limited [Nicole and Peter were over eighteen]. Given the most distressing circumstances of this case my department's consular service has, however, forwarded a copy of the attachments to Interpol Canberra for its information and action, if appropriate."

The warnings now flowed thick and fast. Acting on information supplied by Breault and the others, the US Embassy in Melbourne sent a diplomatic cable to the headquarters of the US State Department, America's Foreign Office, in Washington. The cable, prepared by the Embassy Counsel's Office, warned that a mass suicide was imminent. It added that Koresh would kill representatives of the authorities if they attempted to capture him.

Breault told the US Embassy he thought something more sinister was going on at Waco. There were suggestions that Koresh might be indulging in human sacrifice. Breault was worried about the children.

The State Department cable warned that Koresh "had armed himself with guns and ammunition in order to effect a shoot-out with authorities if they attempt to enter the cult's Waco compound to take away any of the children now living there or to investigate the living conditions."

The cable did not pull any punches. Cult members "had left their jobs; abandoned their property; and moved to Texas where they expected to die as part of a mass suicide ordered by Vernon Howell," it warned.

The warnings also reached a senior Texas politician, Democratic congressman Chet Edwards, who represented the 11th district of Congress in Texas. In April 1992 Edwards received a copy of the prophetically accurate letter David Jewell had sent to Congressman Upton in St Joseph, Michigan. Edwards took the complaint seriously enough to forward it to the FBI. The congressman had read Breault's affidavit and had been deeply disturbed by its contents. Edwards' office later

contacted the authorities a second time, in early 1993. On neither occasion did he receive a reply.

At a subsequent press conference, Congressman Edwards also hinted that he had alerted local law enforcement officers in Waco. But when pressed by journalists, his reply was enigmatic: "Let's just leave it at the FBI for now." Lt Barber's office had been warned so many times, it was becoming embarrassing.

In Michigan David Jewell had finally won his custody battle over Kiri. Judge Ronald Taylor had decided in the face of Marc and Elizabeth Breault's testimony about child abuse that the eleven-year-old girl was too vulnerable to be left at the compound. The judgement was in stark contrast to the view of the Texas authorities in Waco. They had seen the Australians' warnings as unsubstantiated, sour grapes, and had not been sufficiently concerned to launch an early investigation.

Judge Taylor had ordered that Kiri Jewell be removed from the Waco compound for good. Custody would be jointly shared. Kiri would live with her father in Michigan during the school year, and with her mother in California during the summer vacation. The circuit court judge was insistent on another point. "It is further ordered that at no time shall the minor child, Kiri, while in the care of the defendant Sherri Jewell, have any direct or indirect contact with David Koresh, who is also known as Vernon Howell. It is further ordered that at no time shall ... Kiri Jewell experience any contact with any member of any religious sect controlled or influenced by Vernon Howell."

Clearly, the Honorable Ronald J. Taylor had been impressed by the quality of the evidence before him. He had concluded that David Koresh was dangerous and that little girls like Kiri Jewell should be fully protected from him. The Michigan court case was a major blow to Koresh. For the first time he was able to hear the weight of the evidence against him. For the first time, too, he began to understand the full extent of

the treachery of those he had once considered so loyal. Such betrayal was, to his increasingly isolated mind, unacceptable. He would seek his revenge.

Koresh saw the need to develop his own intelligence network. He needed to know what his growing band of enemies was up to. Indeed, when police searched the cult's California residences they found many of the affidavits used in the campaign against him. "There was inside information leaking out somewhere along the way," said Julie Hossack, who was fully briefed on her husband's investigation.

David Koresh knew from the leaks that his lifestyle of unfettered sexual depravity, his total, unrelenting dominance of the disciples at Mount Carmel, was under threat. He knew the authorities would come after him. He knew, too, that although he had cheated the criminal justice system once before – in his 1988 trial – the evidence against him this time was much more compelling.

He could not afford to go to jail. During the 51-day siege FBI negotiators would hear him express his particular fear of imprisonment. He also had a dread of being raped. As Danny Coulson, a key member of the FBI's Waco Task Force, told *Time* magazine: "He had all the wives, food and liquor he wanted. Inside he's God. Outside he's an inmate on trial for his life. What was he going to do?"

The dire warnings of mass suicide at Easter passed. Michelle Coffey returned to write about other matters. Mark England at the *Waco Tribune-Herald* continued to work on his investigation but held back from publishing. Marc Breault and the others in Melbourne waited in vain for feedback from the Australian authorities. David Jewell continued to lobby congressmen and waited, again without result, to hear from the FBI.

The Melbourne US Embassy cable made its way from the State Department to the Justice Department, responsible for the FBI. From there it went to the US Treasury Department

which runs the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. By the time it arrived at ATF Austin, Davy Aguilera was already interviewing Larry Gilbreath, the UPS delivery man.

As the months went by, the 1992 Passover suicide warning began to look like yet another of the Davidian prophecies which had not come true. But the telephone calls from newspapers, the discovery of the affidavits and the loss of the Michigan court case all added up to a watershed for David Koresh. It deepened his paranoia and convinced him of the need to be ready when the authorities finally knocked on his door.

It was shortly after the events of spring 1992 that Koresh embarked on his extensive weapons-acquisition programme. A prophecy had been postponed, but time was running out. The journey to Armageddon was underway.

Part Three

8

The Wise Men of Waco

Professor Park Dietz was not a household name in America. But among specialist students of criminology and psychiatry his work was legendary. Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Los Angeles, Dietz was America's foremost academic expert on the criminal mind. A master of the macabre, he ran the Threat Assessment Group, which evaluated potential mass murderers for the Fortune Top 500 American companies.

Dietz had spent hundreds of hours probing the murky world of the criminal psychopath. His expertise had helped the FBI unravel the darkest secrets of America's most dangerous criminals. Now Waco would prove his most challenging hour.

The professor certainly boasted an impressive track record. Dietz had made his name in a string of celebrated murder cases. They included the unsolved 1982 Chicago Tylenol murders, in which seven people died after swallowing cyanide-tainted pain-relievers. Also in 1982, during the trial of the man who tried to murder President Ronald Reagan, Dietz testified for the prosecution that John Hinkley Jnr had been sane when he pulled the trigger.

Dietz had helped the FBI in some notorious serial murder inquiries too. He had advised the Bureau on the inquiry into William Bonin, the so-called Freeway Killer, who murdered fourteen young men and boys in southern California in 1979-80. He had helped agents convict Arthur Shawcross who killed ten women in New York state in the late 1980s. In one of his

more recent triumphs, he had persuaded a Milwaukee jury that Jeffrey Dahmer, the homosexual mass murderer who cannibalised young men, had not been insane.

For several years now Dietz had worked as the Forensic Psychiatrist for the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. So when Dietz awoke on the morning of Sunday 28 February, 1993 to television pictures of ATF agents being slaughtered at Mount Carmel, he was certain the FBI would be calling on him again.

Within hours of the massacre, the Clinton administration had decided to call in the FBI. At the J. Edgar Hoover building, the Bureau's monolithic headquarters in downtown Washington, Larry Potts, Assistant Director of the Bureau's criminal investigative division, already had his hands full.

On February 26, just 48 hours before the Waco firefight, the World Trade Center had been hit by a terrorist bomb. The massive blast killed five people, injured nearly 500 more, and caused hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of damage to the Center, whose 100-storey twin towers were a national symbol.

America was in shock. For so long immune to the contagion of international terrorism, the country now faced a terrorist campaign involving death and destruction on an unprecedented scale. Americans found it hard to accept that they, like the British with their war against the IRA, were now to be targeted by ruthless terrorists bent on murdering ordinary citizens for distant political ends.

When reports of the bombing were confirmed, FBI Director William Sessions ordered Potts to establish a task force to track down the terrorists. The team, led by Neil Gallagher, head of the Bureau's counter-terrorism department, assembled in a suite of high-tech offices in the FBI's Operations Center.

It was a testing time for Potts, Gallagher and the rest of the top hierarchy at the FBI. The Bureau was becoming increas-

ingly exposed to attack on Capitol Hill, where Congress monitored its work and set limits to its budget. A recent Ethics investigation into Sessions, its elderly director, had uncovered question marks over his tax and expense claims. The dirty laundry was exposed in full and unsavoury detail, seriously undermining the FBI's reputation as the premier law enforcement agency in the world.

Sessions had made the mistake of investigating alleged abuses at Justice, the government department which runs the FBI. By January 1993, Justice officials had completed their own inquiries into Sessions, and William Barr, the outgoing Attorney General in charge of Justice, had told the FBI chief that the report showed "a clear pattern of your taking advantage of government".

The department's grandly titled Office of Professional Responsibility accused him of creating a "sham" to avoid paying taxes on his transportation; misusing government cars and planes; and using government funds to build a fence around his home that didn't meet FBI security standards. The allegations were not quite enough to force Sessions to quit, but they certainly holed him below the waterline.

The inquiry had caused much embarrassment, and even greater soul-searching, at the J. Edgar Hoover building. Senior FBI men felt badly let down. Some were in ill-disguised mutiny. The newly installed Democratic administration of President Bill Clinton, already beset by a host of controversies, was happy to let the Republican-appointed FBI director wait until it decided his fate. Sessions, a former federal judge, now seemed frail and ineffectual to many observers. He was being left to twist in the wind. When Waco came, the FBI was in a leadership vacuum, facing its biggest crisis with few in Washington prepared to back it.

The Sessions scandal may have dealt a damaging blow to the FBI's pride, but many in Washington still regarded it as the finest law enforcement agency in the world. Sessions himself ran more than 10,300 agents, managed an annual

budget of $2bn and had jurisdiction over the investigation of no fewer than 281 different categories of federal crime. The Bureau's traditional role of fighting the Mafia, organised crime, terrorism, espionage and complex multi-million dollar frauds was still expanding. By 1993 FBI agents at field offices across America were fighting street gangs, drug dealers, and the emerging plague of car-jackings. Politicians had recently suggested they begin protecting abortion clinics from a rising tide of violence by pro-Life extremists. The FBI's new clout had not been welcomed in all quarters. Many felt the Bureau's bureaucracy had became bloated and unwieldy. Perhaps it had bitten off more than it could chew.

When Sessions ordered the setting up of a Waco task force, Larry Potts knew he had his work cut out. Privately, many of his senior colleagues regarded the ATF raid on the Mount Carmel compound as ill-conceived in the planning and amateurish in execution. Some agents believed the decision to go in had been criminally negligent.

The attempt to arrest Koresh had been doomed from the start. The very fact that the debacle had been captured on live television and in broad daylight indicated that something was badly wrong. If the TV people had known the ATF raid was going on, surely Koresh and his so-called Mighty Men had also been ready? The key question in the Hoover building that week was whether the FBI could do any better.

On Monday 1 March, when Potts called his senior investigators to the Operations Center, some of those present may have already had forebodings about the likely success of their new mission. The omens were not good. In the White House, President Bill Clinton was floundering over the appointment of a new Attorney General. The new President had already been forced to back away from his first two female candidates who had stepped down after it emerged that they had employed illegal immigrants as domestic staff.

Across the FBI Operations Room, the World Trade Center task force had already scored a dramatic breakthrough, and

was about to arrest an Arab suspect who had rented the van containing the bomb. Over the next days, the newly formed Waco task force would look enviously on as first one suspect, then others were arrested. All this, amid euphoric media coverage and encouraging nods of approval from the Bureau's political masters at Justice and the White House.

Larry Potts knew the odds at Waco were stacked heavily against him. Already, he had the deaths of four federal agents and the wounding of sixteen others to investigate. It had been the largest and most spectacular slaughter of federal agents in recent history. Potts had seen similar cult stand-offs end in appalling tragedy. In May 1985, police had used helicopters to attack the besieged headquarters of MOVE, the violent and anarchic religious cult in Philadelphia. The death toll and resulting fire, which left hundreds of people homeless, sparked a public row over the authorities' heavy-handed tactics.

The FBI Assistant Director had carefully studied reports about David Koresh in the national papers. He knew he was faced with a criminal psychopath who held a massive, though still unquantified, arsenal. As he addressed his Waco task force, Potts realised he had inherited a deadly situation. The stand-off would certainly prove the most difficult and unenviable task he had faced in his long FBI career.

The newly formed Waco task force now set up a second command post. A telephone call to the Bureau's Dallas field office found Special Agent Jeffrey Jamar ready to go. Jamar had been monitoring the developing inquiry into the Mount Carmel cult and was already briefed on the ATF's operation. Now he and dozens of other FBI men and women from all over the south and east of America descended on the Texas State Technical College to take over from the traumatised ATF command team.

There was no mistaking the FBI agents as they descended upon the Mount Carmel site. Sharp-suited, clean-cut and sporting reflective polaroid sunglasses, they drove their shiny,

wine-coloured station wagons up to the perimeter checkpoints surrounding the compound. A tinted automatic car window would slide down and a tanned, well-manicured hand would flip open a crisp black leather wallet. Inside, gleaming with pride and authority, was the gold crest of the scales of Justice, the internationally recognised symbol of the FBI warrant. The pot-bellied, khaki-clad Texas Rangers manning the checkpoints, tilted their broad Stetsons in deference as the "Feds" rolled into town.

Inside the command centre, a mile over the rolling prairie from the besieged ranch, telephone lines and closed-circuit video cameras were hurriedly installed. The FBI team under Jamar brought with them plane-loads of investigative paraphernalia. Amid a mass of cabling and a flurry of carpenters, the command post was quickly knocked into shape. Coded fax machines, telephone scramblers, radio transmitters, receivers and video monitors all linked Jamar's command post to the hundreds of FBI agents surrounding the Mount Carmel compound, and to the Operations Center in Washington.

The Bureau's top negotiators from the Critical Incident Negotiating Team set up shop in a small room inside the college. Nobody knew it then, but they would be spending the next 51 days and nights in their cramped negotiators' room listening to the endless ebb and flow of David Koresh and his biblical tirades. The Incident Team were lucky in one way, though. They were led by Byron Sage, a veteran of 24 years' service in the Bureau and senior supervisory agent at the FBI's field office in Austin. He would play a critical role in the unfolding drama.

Assisting the negotiators were agents from the FBI's intelligence division. Their job was to collect and analyse every scrap of information about Koresh, his followers and the day-to-day situation inside Ranch Apocalypse. The intelligence agents were supported by technical experts charged with placing the "target" building under continuous 24-hour surveillance, using every human and technical means available.

Potts also despatched the Bureau's elite Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) to the Waco Command Center. The HRT's commando-style agents were the nearest the FBI had to Britain's own Special Air Service (SAS). Clad in black fire-proof overalls, with bullet-proof helmets and torches attached to the ends of their automatic machine-guns, they were trained to rescue hostages trapped in the most dangerous of situations.

The HRT was to have the most frustrating experience during the following seven weeks. As the decision-making process developed in Washington, a question mark hung over its very presence at Waco.

The team had been trained to rescue hostages, defined as innocent civilians held by barricaded criminals against their will. The unique problem which the Bureau faced at Waco was that nearly all of those inside the compound wanted to remain there. From the outset there were no guarantees that any wanted to escape – even if the Hostage Rescue Team could give them the chance.

Byron Sage identified the problem: "We were faced with a very unique challenge. How do we talk [Koresh] out of a situation where he has everything that he possibly needs inside that structure and everything that he doesn't want is waiting for him outside?"

The Hostage Team laboured under a further difficulty. It was only 50 strong and there were no replacements. Its imminent exhaustion would eventually prove critical in determining the outcome of the siege.

Finally, Larry Potts called up the FBI snipers. These sharpshooters had passed the toughest firearms selection tests and were widely regarded as the most accurate marksmen in America. Each sniper could hit a 25-cent coin at a range of 200 yards.

The negotiators, the intelligence agents, the Hostage Rescue Team and the snipers were a formidable combination. But no amount of firepower or high technology equipment could resolve the present crisis. Neither was the Bureau's

most powerful weapon among the impressive army of 400 agents which encircled the besieged cult headquarters.

To defeat Koresh and rescue the women and children, the FBI had to get inside the cult leader's mind. The ATF had already monumentally misjudged Koresh. Potts could not afford a repetition. So he made a call to a group of experts at the FBI's Training Academy in Quantico, Virginia. There, a special unit devoted to the study of serial killers and other dangerous criminals was now urgently directed to assist the Waco task force.

The Quantico Academy had a reputation unparalleled in the world of forensic psychiatry. FBI Special Agents John Douglas and Robert Hazelwood spent their time drawing up psychological "offender profiles" of America's most violent killers. The Academy, set in hundreds of acres of lush Virginia countryside, had become famous a couple of years previously when the Oscar-winning film *The Silence of the Lambs* had detailed the work of a fictional female FBI agent in tracking down a serial sex killer, attracting worldwide attention to the Quantico scientists. But Douglas and Hazelwood were not stereotypical Hollywood-type FBI agents. They were highly respected academics in their own field.

The Quantico Academy began to furnish the Waco task force and its twin command centres in Washington and Texas with the work product of two different units. First, the Academy called up its Investigative Support Unit, part of the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime. Here a team chaired by Douglas and attended by Hazelwood drew up detailed "offender profiles" of Koresh and his chief lieutenants.

On a different floor of the same building, a second team was pooled from the Bureau's Special Operations and Research Unit. Part of the FBI's Quantico-based Behavioral Sciences Unit, its task was to consult on the best negotiating strategy.

Working hand-in-glove, the two units swapped material

and fed their analyses and recommendations to Washington and Waco. Special Agent Les Davies, attached to the Quantico Academy, described their work: "They were involved from day one in the preparation of psychological assessments of David Koresh and his followers. Their task was to evaluate and predict his possible future behaviour." It was not long before they became known as the Wise Men of Waco.

Each day of the crisis, the two units received detailed up-to-the-minute information from the Waco command post. Together with background information on Koresh and the cult, they studied interviews with former cult members such as Marc Breault and Robyn Bunds. They pored over transcripts of dozens of hours of talk between Koresh and the Critical Incident Negotiating Team. They examined transcripts of conversations which the FBI had bugged inside the compound. They scrutinised the texts of letters sent out to the FBI by Koresh. As the siege wore on, they liaised with psychiatrists at the Texas Children's Hospital in Houston and monitored the first sinister signs of child abuse.

In every scrap of conversation, every line of the cult leader's letters, they searched for hints of his future intentions. They looked desperately for signs of disagreement or mutiny among his lieutenants, and sought ways for the negotiators to divide the cult members amongst themselves.

Did Koresh have a strategy? Did it involve peaceful surrender? When might this happen and how could it best be secured? How loyal were his disciples? How many were prepared to die with him? Would he murder them if they threatened to come out? The choice of negotiating strategy would be determined by answers to these questions.

Should the Critical Incident Negotiating Team play soft or hard? Should they offer food or other essential supplies? Should the electricity be shut off? How best could they get the women and the children out safely? These were some of the issues Douglas, Hazelwood and others agonised over in their Quantico conference room as they tirelessly debated

the scenarios that might unfold inside Ranch Apocalypse.

The Academy was confident of its own ability to assess the growing crisis. But prudence, together with an appreciation of the potential scale of any further tragedy, dictated it take wider soundings. The Bureau accordingly called on outside experts to give its own internal assessments greater breadth. The expert they turned to first was the man they knew and trusted best.

Professor Park Dietz's paper, "Sex Offender Profiling by the FBI: A Preliminary Conceptual Model", was a groundbreaking analysis of the pioneering work of the Quantico's Behavioral Science Unit. It laid out, in elegant and unpretentious language, the foundations of psychological offender profiling. Dietz took as his starting point the disastrous police investigation into the case of the Boston Strangler. In 1968, after several women had been brutally murdered in Boston, police were desperate for clues to the killer's identity. They turned to a team of university psychiatrists and psychologists for help. It was a fatal error. For reasons that were never properly explained, the university experts concluded that the murders were the work of two different people working independently of each other. One killer, they predicted, was homosexual. The police consequently devoted enormous time and manpower to an investigation of Boston's homosexual community. Meanwhile, Alberto De Salvo, the real, heterosexual, killer went on to murder a total of thirteen victims.

When De Salvo was finally caught the police realised the extent of their error. American law enforcement officials were subsequently quick to see the need for properly trained experts.

In his academic paper, Dietz was candid about the limitations of psychological profiling. The process of drawing up a description of an unknown offender was not a science. In essence, profiling was no different from the kind of informal, inferential and inspired detective work epitomised by the fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes. But Dietz was adamant

that if profiling was carried out professionally by experts who constantly reviewed their findings, it would prove an invaluable tool.

He identified several stages in the profiling process. First, and in common with the investigating detective, the profiler gathered all available information about the case, including evidence of the crime itself, material from the crime scene and interviews with any surviving witnesses.

Next, the profiler had to discover just how and why the criminal behaved as he did. One important profiling tool here had been established by Hazelwood and Douglas in an earlier paper: the distinction between the organised and disorganised criminal. Similar distinctions allowed Dietz to draw up a matrix comprising sixteen different characteristics of each offender. A typical offender, for example, might be organised, heterosexual, sadistic and a paedophile.

Dietz was confident that his profiling techniques would bear important fruit. His view was supported by the two men most closely involved in profiling for the Waco task force, John Douglas and Robert Hazelwood. The two FBI agents were widely regarded as the world's leading law enforcement experts on offender profiling. Their reputation stretched back to 1980 when they had co-authored a celebrated treatise on the criminal mind, "The Lust Murderer". Dietz had been so impressed that he had used it to illustrate his own "preliminary conceptual model" of offender profiling.

Lust murderers, they established, kill for sexual gratification. But they also feel a need to get even with society and to have an impact on their community. They need to punish others. A typical lust murderer would have been a manipulator and troublemaker in his teenage years, and be prone to aggression. He would have experienced difficulty getting on with his family, friends and those in authority. As an adult he would generally dislike people. He would be self-centred, manipulating those around him, as Dietz put it, with "an amiable facade".

Over the years, the two FBI agents and their consultant psychiatrist co-authored three academic papers and worked closely on a number of major inquiries, many involving offender profiling. In 1983 Dietz and Hazelwood co-authored "Autoerotic Fatalities", a unique study of cases in which victims had indulged in bizarre sexual rituals, accidentally hanging themselves during masturbation.

So when the FBI was called into Waco on the day of the calamitous ATF raid, Dietz was not unhappy to hear from his old colleagues and their superiors at the Waco task force in the Washington Operations Center. "I received a phone call the day the FBI were asked to go to Waco," Dietz recalled. "Within forty-eight hours I was in the command post at the Technical College."

Dietz's initial role was to observe and assess the negotiations with Koresh and Steve Schneider. There was a day FBI negotiator and a night negotiator. Dietz spent most of his time with the day negotiator, during the critical early period of contact. In most siege situations the first forty-eight hours are usually vital to the eventual outcome of the crisis. Dietz was there to make sure the FBI did things right.

For an outsider, the professor was given unique access to the negotiating process: "I was able to listen in to the conversations as they were taking place and I also had access to the investigation files assembled by the ATF," he recalled. "Those were two very long days."

The FBI's consultant psychiatrist also interviewed some of those who had escaped on the day of the raid and also other cult members released in the first days of the siege.

He debriefed Robert Rodriguez, the ATF undercover agent who had spent time inside the compound with Koresh and the others. At the end of two days Dietz wrote a lengthy memorandum summing up his views on Koresh and the FBI's strategy during the initial negotiations.

"I thought Koresh was both delusional and also highly deceptive and manipulative," he recalled telling the Bureau.

"He was not only mad but bad. It was an exceptionally difficult problem. He was very difficult to deal with."

Dietz made a number of key recommendations on the FBI's initial strategy. But he remains puzzled today why two of his most important suggestions were apparently ignored.

One concerned the continuing role of the ATF. As soon as the FBI took over the Waco command post, ATF agents were removed from direct contact with Koresh. But they remained at the scene throughout the siege, having taken it upon themselves to help the Texas Rangers secure the outer perimeter round the 77-acre compound. Koresh had several pairs of high-powered binoculars and, in the 60-foot watchtower, an excellent vantage point for miles around. He could hardly miss the ATF agents with their distinctive black tops carrying the lettering of their agency's acronym emblazoned across their chests.

"I told the FBI that I thought the ATF should be removed from the area as soon as possible," Dietz said. "I thought that Koresh would regard them as Satanic and evil. I suggested they be removed. It was a mistake to keep them there. I don't know who made that mistake."

Dietz also recommended that the FBI use a consistent psychological approach in negotiations with Koresh. He believed they should either play Mr Tough Guy or play Mr Nice Guy, but not continually interchange between them. One minute the Bureau was sending in essential supplies and listening patiently to the cult leader's endless rantings. The next, it was bombarding the ranch with loud music and flashing lights and slamming the telephone down on him. Dietz was diplomatic, but he felt the entire basis of the strategy was ill-conceived: "There were lots of people around. They were not adopting a consistent approach. I suspect there were some contradictions in all that happened. But I don't know by who."

As he overheard Koresh talking on the phone to the negotiators and as he studied the voluminous intelligence files

gathered by Davy Aguilera and the ATF, Park Dietz reflected on the type of criminal mind the FBI were now facing. The Bureau's forensic psychiatrist sought desperately for a key to unlock the door to the cult leader's personality. He knew Koresh was a paedophile and sexual predator. He knew he was a murderer. But he felt certain that Koresh was not what Hazelwood and Douglas had called a "lust murderer". As he sought to categorise Koresh, to find signs in his character that might help the FBI predict his future actions, Dietz drew on the work of the past decade, seeking for clues somewhere in the studies he, Douglas and Hazelwood had made of the minds of dozens of serial killers and mass murderers. Perhaps the Wise Men could find a clue to Koresh in their previous work on other killers. Killers such as Ted Bundy, America's biggest mass murderer, or Randy Kraft, who murdered as many as 65 young men he picked up in the Los Angeles area in the 1970s.

Some experts believed that the age of mass murder in America had begun in 1966. That was the year that Richard Speck strangled and stabbed eight young women in a Chicago apartment. In the same year Texas saw its first major mass slaughter when Charles Whitman killed his wife and mother and climbed a tower on the campus at the University of Texas and shot fourteen other people dead.

Serial killings were on the rise too. The manner in which they were being carried out was becoming increasingly depraved. In 1970 Juan Corona had raped and murdered 25 migrant male farm workers in California. A few years later Ed Kemper, another California killer, shocked the world when it emerged that he had had sexual intercourse with the headless corpses of his victims. A few years later still and again in California, Leonard Lake, another serial psychopath, had videotaped himself raping and torturing his victims.

The list was long. Christopher Wilder, from Florida, persuaded attractive women to let him take photographs of them. He then kidnapped, raped and murdered them. John Gacy

raped and tortured to death 33 boys, burying their bodies in his basement.

In the 1970s and 80s mass murder was also on the increase. Experts classified mass murder as involving four or more victims in a short space of time. By the end of the 1980s America was witnessing three such mass murders each month. The murder of four ATF agents at Mount Carmel, Dietz reflected, was just the latest.

Dietz himself was an expert on the mind of a new and growing category of mass murderer: the early-to-middle-aged "berserker". The typical berserker was a violent employee or ex-employee bent on getting revenge on his workplace or on society in general.

The past decade had seen a rash of such killings and the California professor had predicted that they were on the increase. One of the worst cases took place in July 1984 when James Huberty, an unemployed security guard, murdered twenty people in a McDonald's restaurant in San Ysidro, California. In 1987 another "berserker" killed sixteen people in Arkansas. In October 1991 Texas suffered a further berserker tragedy when George Kennard drove into a cafeteria restaurant in Killeen and opened fire, killing nearly two dozen diners. Killeen was just an hour's drive south of Waco.

As far as spectacular murders went, America seemed to have more than any other country. Texas, in particular, seemed to attract them and had featured prominently in the recent history of such murders. Dietz could hardly forget that the assassination of President John F. Kennedy had been carried out in Dallas.

With its liberal gun laws, the state still retained some of its old Wild West image. It boasted Charles Whitman and George Kennard. Now, perhaps, David Koresh would be added to the list. Texans seemed to build a myth around such individuals. The myth of David Koresh was already evident to Dietz as he drove past Overlook Hill, a picturesque picnic spot three miles from the Mount Carmel site. There, a burgeoning and

macabre tourist trade in T-shirts, coffee cups and other souvenirs of the siege had grown up virtually overnight. The violence and the mystique were beyond the understanding of visitors from abroad. What was it that drove such people?

Dietz detected a pattern in many of the "berserkers" he had studied. They read survivalist paramilitary literature such as *Soldier of Fortune*. They were particularly fond of violent films and TV. They were often obsessed by weapons and when angry spoke of guns in a threatening manner. Berserkers were fastidious about acquiring their guns legally. Their "home arsenal" was built up gradually, and was often in place a long time before their outburst of violence came. Many berserkers were prone to the "weapons effect", typically collecting exotic automatic and semi-automatic machine-guns in great quantities. The threat to use firearms was always latent, and Dietz felt it was characteristic of the violent, manipulative personality found in such people.

The typical berserker, Dietz knew, often suffered from paranoia and this might partly explain his exaggerated fascination for weapons. He was quick to detect unfairness, malice or injustice in others, even when it was absent.

There was also a geographical pattern in the distribution of berserkers. The American states with the highest number of workplace berserker massacres were Florida, California and, interestingly, Texas. They were the states with the highest workforce turnovers, where habitual losers went to start anew.

There were other traits which Dietz reflected on as he pored over the ATF intelligence dossiers at the Waco Command Center in those first two days of the siege. Many mass murderers had been loners, removed from the support of family, friends or workplace. For many the crisis in self-worth could only end in suicide or death by a police marksman's bullet. Few anticipated surviving their crimes. Curt Suplee, a *Washington Post* writer and, with Dietz, one of America's leading writers on the subject, has speculated:

> This has led some to theorise that some instances of mass slaughter – including those by hijackers, terrorists and political assassins – are actually super-elaborated suicides in which the killer/victim seeks to confirm his self-loathing by monstrously aggrandizing his own death. Thus just as a Berserker frequently pursues "murder by proxy" in killing co-workers rather than the hated boss, a man may engage in "suicide by proxy", slaying his entire family before killing himself.

Such people, Park Dietz believed, had vulnerable and socially isolated pasts. Many were not insane, and seemed frighteningly close in character to ordinary people. Those whom Douglas, Hazelwood and Dietz had dubbed the "organised killers" exhibited a high degree of cunning and self-control.

In the search for psychological clues to Koresh, Dietz reflected that recent behavioural studies of multiple sex killers had uncovered three early symptoms of sadistic activity: bedwetting, the torture of animals and fire-starting. Many such murderers had an uncontrollable, predatory sexuality. Nearly all of these killings were carried out by men under 34. The majority were burdened by the growing rootlessness of American society. Typically, the killer was familiar with firearms, had a sense of real or imagined slights and had few contacts with the outside world. His decision to initiate mass slaughter – which might also involve the "proxy suicide" of those in his family – was usually precipitated by a particular "trigger" event which might confirm to him his sense that the outside world was against him.

From his studies of more than 150 mass murders, Dietz took the view that many such killers saw no way out. He had never come across a single one who wasn't at least partially interested in suicide. Dietz had defined several types of mass murderer. The most spectacular was the "pseudo-commando", such as Huberty, the perpetrator of the California McDonald's

massacre, Whitman in Houston and Kennard in Killeen. They exhibited mistrust and suspiciousness. They were paranoid misfits and "collectors of injustice". Britain had had its own "pseudo-commando" berserker in Michael Ryan, who killed sixteen people before killing himself in Hungerford in 1987.

Some were satisfied with a firing range. But others seemed driven to mass slaughter. The multiple killer often had a higher than average IQ and was sometimes well-versed in police procedures.

As they turned their attention to the Waco crisis, Professor Dietz and his fellow FBI profilers could now reflect that Koresh might share some combination of these characteristics. It was the job of the Wise Men of Waco to find out which and to formulate a plan which could prevent the nightmare scenario unfolding. Amid all the psychological profiling of David Koresh and his Mighty Men, no one wanted a repeat of the Boston Strangler disaster when lives had been lost because the experts had got it wrong.

9

Dialogue with the Devil

Even before the sound of gunfire had ceased to echo around Mount Carmel, the ATF had begun negotiations with Koresh. As the gunpowder smoke cleared, ATF agents and paramedical crews were left to gather up their dead and wounded. Four special agents – Todd McKeehan, Conway LeBleu, Rob Williams and Steve Willis – lay dead or dying by the compound door. The brutal manner in which they had been despatched dismayed the most hardened of their surviving colleagues. Even as they were dying, Koresh and his Mighty Men had lobbed dozens of home-made hand grenades at them. As the surviving agents retreated, John McLemore, the local TV journalist who was pinned down by the gunfire, risked his life to put the wounded bodies of four ATF agents on the hood of his car and drive them back to safety.

Koresh himself was injured. In a melodramatic flourish, he telephoned his mother Bonnie Haldeman in Chandler, Texas. She later told the world about the chilling message he had left on her answering machine: "Hello mama, it's your boy. They shot me and I'm dying, alright? But I'll be back real soon, OK? I'll see y'all in the skies. Bye."

The wounded cult leader was not as badly injured as he liked to pretend. To the annoyance of the federal authorities, he spent much of the next 48 hours giving interviews to radio and television reporters. The telephone interviews gave the outside world its first taste of the man who would hold America hostage for the next 51 days. They reflected a bizarre side to his character: his love affair with the media and his evident

desire for international fame. On the evening of the raid, Koresh contacted the Cable News Network (CNN) and gave a live twenty-minute interview to David French, the channel's astonished Washington anchorman.

"Nobody wants to listen to my doctrine," Koresh complained. The cult leader rambled on, wondering out loud how people would react if he claimed to be Christ. The diatribe was interspersed with the occasional entertaining one-liner. Asked at one point why his disciples had been involved in paramilitary training, he replied: "Christ told his disciples, if you don't have a sword, go buy one."

Other answers were less coherent. When the CNN anchorman enquired what it would take to end the siege peacefully, the cult leader responded: "In Psalm 45 we begin to see that God speaks through his Word, through his Book." But the Psalm yielded little light, even to the biblical cognoscenti.

The next morning Koresh spent almost an hour addressing the listeners of KRLD Radio in Dallas. The FBI, still arriving in force at the Texas State Technical College, were furious. Byron Sage and his colleagues from the Critical Incident Negotiating Team couldn't get through to start up talks with Koresh: the single telephone line at Mount Carmel was constantly engaged. Senior agents pleaded with the local media, but no-one was going to turn down an "exclusive" interview with a psychopathic mass murderer who was now holding the world at bay.

The wounded cult leader was just as determined to milk the publicity. "I am the anointed one," he told radio listeners breezily. "I've been shot. I'm bleeding bad," he announced.

Koresh then promised to surrender if the radio stations agreed to broadcast a rambling 57-minute taped message. The sermon was duly broadcast. As a result eight children were allowed to leave the compound, in groups of two. They carried handwritten notes from their parents explaining who they were. But the first promise of surrender was broken.

When the negotiators eventually established regular contact

with Koresh, their strategy was to try to calm things down. Byron Sage, the trained FBI negotiator who spent more time talking to Koresh than anyone else, began in a respectful tone. He would end by losing patience. The initial strategy succeeded in getting 37 people out, including 21 children who were released during the first four days of the siege.

The system, tried and tested, had worked successfully dozens of times before. The negotiators comprised FBI, ATF and Austin police department officers operating round-the-clock in teams of five. One team worked twelve hours during the day, a second worked twelve hours at night. They sat around a table in their dingy room at the Texas State Technical College. A primary negotiator, such as Sage, would speak on the telephone with Koresh, Schneider or one of the other lieutenants. The other four agents would listen in with headsets, scribbling notes and making suggestions. Among the four was a "coach", a senior FBI-trained hostage negotiator who filtered the notes and suggestions before they were passed to the primary negotiator. The conversations were taped and broadcast so senior agents such as Jamar and Ricks could listen in. In an adjacent room sat some of the Wise Men of Waco listening eagerly on headphones for any hint of Koresh's real purpose.

"Those were long days," said Park Dietz, who monitored negotiations at the very beginning of the crisis.

As March wore on, it would become apparent that no more ranch residents were coming out. The FBI team would switch tactics. Mr Tough Guy replaced Mr Nice Guy. They no longer tolerated Koresh's endless religious diatribes. They hung up on him. Sometimes they openly mocked him. With the switch came psychological warfare, the bright lights and loud music. "It was not there just to irritate them," said Sage. "It was to keep them on their guard, to keep them so they weren't at a fine-honed edge."

The long, tedious talks with Koresh posed a unique challenge to the two negotiating teams. They were to talk about

many things over the next seven weeks. Koresh spoke for hours about his childhood. He talked about guns, and about death. He also talked about more mundane things such as milk deliveries. There was also the important matter of book and movie rights, something in which Dick DeGuerin, his lawyer, would soon become intimately involved.

There was one subject the cult leader always returned to. Koresh seemed convinced that the prophetic passages of Isaiah (whence he had borrowed his name) and Revelations applied directly – and literally – to him. This obsession with biblical prophecy meant that the FBI Critical Incident Negotiating Team had to spend much of their spare time boning up on the Old and New Testaments. Understanding Koresh as he discoursed at torturous length on the meaning of the Seven Seals and the coming of the Apocalypse became a professional challenge in which the lives of some 90 cult members were at stake. As FBI agent Bob Ricks confided drily during one of the interminable daily press conferences: "We do have Bible study hour."

Of course this was not the first siege in recent American history in which law enforcement agents had had to deal with criminal oddballs obsessed by eccentric theological ideas. During a shoot-out in Jasper, Arkansas, in 1982 a man and a woman hijacked a bus and demanded that police shoot them dead. They said they had to fulfil a prophecy that they would be resurrected. When the police refused, the hijackers turned their guns on themselves.

Five years earlier another religious fanatic, this time a Muslim, shot dead a journalist in Washington DC and took 134 hostages. The siege ended peacefully 38 hours later, but only after negotiators helped by Muslim diplomats had spent hours discussing the Islamic holy book, the Koran.

The theology of David Koresh was not easy to grasp. The cult leader's interpretation of selected scripture taxed the minds of several of America's top theologians, who had been brought in by the FBI to consult on the crisis. But the

respected theologians were working at a disadvantage. Their interpretations stemmed from standard academic readings of the biblical prophecies, as taught at school and university. Their thinking was structured and disciplined. It was, above all, based on a rational interpretation of the Bible.

David Koresh had not arrived at his own idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible by going to school. The cult leader did not share the same theological belief system as the armchair experts. Ironically, the very qualifications that made the FBI turn to these experts were the reason for their inability to understand Koresh.

This was the heart of the FBI's strategic misunderstanding. Whether Koresh was rational or irrational, whether he was sane or insane, it would emerge later that only one thing about him was predictable. His actions would in some way be based on the Prophets and Revelations, and on his own inscrutable reading of them. His biblical rantings were eclectic, he was fond of taking quotations entirely out of context and adapting stories to his own ends. The thread of his discourse was often hard to discern; his biblical exegesis frequently obscure.

Koresh saw himself as Christ, the Son or Lamb of God. In the Book of Revelations, the Lamb brings about pestilence and a war against Israel that comes as a prelude to the end of the world. But Koresh also saw himself as King David, the Old Testament King of Israel. The cult leader's repertory of biblical references shifted from one self-image to the other. Often there was fusion, a composite self-image with King David imposed upon Christ or the Lamb.

The sheer abundance of biblical allusion and metaphor was bewildering. In the Texas State Technical College, Byron Sage and the rest of the Critical Incident Negotiating Team struggled to find a way through the shifting sands of the cult leader's multiple symbolic meanings.

They learned the first clue to the cult leader's theological agenda as it emerged in his broadcast on KRLD Radio on the

first night of the siege. "My father, my God who is on the throne in Heaven has given me a book of Seven Seals ... My reward, which is the books, is with me to give unto everyman the knowledge of the Seven Seals."

The Seven Seals were to be found in Koresh's primer, the Old Testament Book of Revelations. The Seals held the key and the self-styled biblical scholar was curiously arrogant about his professed knowledge of them. He believed that in understanding their true significance, he was head and shoulders above rival interpreters. "When it comes to facts, there's not a scholar or theologian that can stand against what I have," he once boasted. "If you don't know the Seven Seals, you really don't know Christ, so who are you to promise someone else that they'll be saved by accepting your opinion?" In another of his one-liners, he asserted: "The Seven Seals are the acid test for who knows God and who doesn't."

The Seals are a book within a book. Like others in the Seventh Day Adventist Church from which their sect evolved, the Branch Davidians believed the Seven Seals marked the cataclysmic events that mankind will experience in the final days before the end of the world.

The besieged residents of Mount Carmel had taken this precept one step further. They believed that David Koresh himself had the power to "open" the Seventh Seal, thus bringing about the end of the world, the Apocalypse.

Koresh vowed to lead his disciples through the Seven Seals into Heaven. When God destroyed the world, the Davidians, too, would be martyred. After the conflagration, the believers would then return to populate the next world, killing the unbelievers or "Babylonians" as they did so. It was that simple.

The cult leader's egocentric reading of the prophecies was the cornerstone of the new Branch Davidian doctrine. Koresh believed the new doctrine gave him the ultimate sanction to act as sexual predator. He also used it to justify the primitive conditions in which he kept his people. On the Bible, too,

Koresh based his conception of the Mighty Men, those heavily armed disciples whom he most trusted. The Mighty Men were so dedicated to the Lamb or King David, whom they saw as God, that they happily gave their wives to him. If the men desisted from sexual relations in this world they would find their perfect mates in Heaven, their future partners emerging from a spare rib as Adam had first created Eve.

In short, the entire basis of the cult's doctrine was ordered around the concept of apocalypse and fiery rebirth, with the odd sprinkling of traditional Christianity thrown in. As their response to the ATF raid showed, most adult cult members were prepared to sacrifice themselves and their families for this outlandish and deadly cocktail of beliefs.

A thousand miles away and in a very different world, Janet Reno, the new Attorney General of the United States, was being sworn into office. It was March 12, some would later say the unlucky 13th day of the Waco siege. The new Attorney General had known her job would be hard. But nobody had told her to prepare for a baptism of fire.

As America's senior law enforcement officer, Reno answered directly to the President and was responsible for the actions of the FBI and the Justice Department which ran it.

Until a few weeks before Janet Reno had been an obscure state attorney in Florida. But then in January 1993 President Clinton had run into trouble with his proposed choices for a new Attorney General. First Zoe Baird, a rich corporate lawyer, and then Kimba Wood, a socially prominent New York judge, had failed their nominations. The Washington press corps made "Nannygate" an issue. Clinton cut his losses and hastily looked around for a third candidate.

Reno seemed fireproof. She had started her legal career in a Miami law firm and then moved to work as a government prosecutor. Her first government job was as assistant state attorney, a position equivalent to that in Britain of junior barrister in a provincial office of the Crown Prosecution Service.

Reno's brief involved preparing and presenting government prosecution cases against a whole range of indicted suspects, from drug gangs to fraudsters, rapists to murderers. She also gained invaluable political experience, working on her way up as Staff Director of the State Judiciary Committee.

Reno's rise up the greasy pole was slow. But by 1978 she had made it to the post of State Attorney in Miami. In a city with one of the highest murder rates in America and where crime was considered a spectator sport, Janet Reno was never short of a challenge.

The FBI soon learned that you messed with Reno at your cost. Reno's mother had wrestled with alligators. Reno herself had swum with them. For relaxation she liked to go scuba-diving or spend an afternoon chain-sawing trees. At nights she would lie on a trampoline by her porch, reciting poetry from Coleridge to relatives, surrounded by her 35 peacocks – all called Horace.

When the new Attorney General arrived in Washington, she blew in like a breath of fresh air. On her first day at work Reno trudged to her office in a howling late-winter blizzard, the snow touching the tops of her Everglades boots and her newly acquired security detail struggling to keep up behind her.

Strikingly tall at six feet two inches, she had a gaunt, bespectacled appearance that made her look like a maiden aunt or elderly librarian. Behind her back some called her "Bigfoot".

Reno's ungainly appearance belied the truth. It hid a formidable legal mind with an acute grasp on political reality. A new joke at fashionable Washington dinner parties had it that Janet Reno was as comfortable with the dangerous political predators on Capitol Hill as she was with the alligators of Florida's famous swamplands.

While Reno was the political overlord, the day-to-day handling of the siege was conducted by FBI director William Sessions and a small team he gathered around him. Almost

immediately after watching broadcast television pictures of the initial ATF raid, Sessions had telephoned ATF director Stephen Higgins offering him the facilities of the FBI and its elite Hostage Rescue Team. "He accepted and I ordered that the necessary resources be deployed in Waco," Sessions later told an investigating Congressional committee.

Sessions, elderly, avuncular and bespectacled, had once carried the imposing authority suited to a former top Federal court judge turned FBI director. Now he seemed frail and tense. Washington had turned against him. When Waco erupted into gunfire, Sessions was still reeling from the Justice Department's inquiry into his expenses. Many observers thought he should have resigned. Sessions struggled on. The FBI director, though, had not lost his legendary ability to delegate.

He was fortunate in that the men he now looked to were all senior FBI officials, many with years' experience in the field. The FBI chief's "A" team was led by Floyd Clarke, the Bureau's highly capable Deputy Director and a prime candidate to succeed Sessions when he departed. A second key official was Doug Gow, Associate Deputy Director for Investigations and one of the finest criminal investigators in America. Gow had first risen to prominence as head of the FBI's Washington field office. For three years he and Neil Gallagher, head of counter-terrorism, had been at the cutting edge of the Bureau's most important previous mass murder inquiry, the investigation into the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in December 1988. Gow was the FBI's front man in charge of liaison with senior Scottish police at the Lockerbie incident centre. The indictment of two Libyan Intelligence agents for that appalling crime had been largely down to the brilliant work of Gow and the Scottish detectives.

Clarke and Gow were backed up by two other senior FBI men. One was Larry Potts, Assistant Director of the Bureau's criminal investigative division. Potts took control of the criminal inquiry into the murder of the ATF men. The second was

John Hicks, Assistant Director of the FBI's laboratory division. His work was to prove vital in the forensic and arson inquiries which followed the fire.

Sessions also relied heavily on the advice of two FBI veterans who probably knew more about how to handle sieges than anyone else. Danny Coulson, a Deputy Assistant Director of the Bureau's criminal investigative division, had led the Hostage Rescue Team when it was first established in 1983. Coulson was cool in a crisis and his experience of commanding dozens of siege situations was second to none. Coulson acted as mentor to Dick Rogers, the current commander of the HRT, who was stationed at the Waco command post. Finally, on the ground there was Jeff Jamar, the special agent in charge of the Waco operation, and Bob Ricks, another special agent in charge, who assisted Jamar and acted as media spokesman.

Sessions gave his "A" team a specific brief: draw up recommendations for the best way to handle the siege, then convince Janet Reno that the recommendations were right. From the outset the FBI followed the rule book. Its goal at Waco was simple: "meaningful negotiation" for the lives of those inside, especially the children.

The plan aimed to increase the pressure by increments, forcing Koresh to negotiate and leave the compound peacefully. Throughout the siege, the HRT restricted, step by step, the area under Koresh's control. In the last days, the team had shrunk the perimeter so much that its vehicles were bumping right up against the compound walls.

At the same time the FBI planning team under Coulson, Rogers and Jamar knew it had to safeguard the lives of its own agents. It could not risk a second shoot-out. Already, four federal agents had died and another sixteen were injured. An estimated 12,000 rounds of ammunition had been fired by cult members at the approaching ATF agents on February 28. The .50-calibre machine-gun was a special threat. It had killed one agent in the shoot-out and fired bullets the size of small

bananas. It could shoot straight through six feet of sand bags and had a killing range of a mile and an actual range of 3,000 yards. On the day of the disastrous raid, the ATF had not been outnumbered or outplanned: it had been comprehensively outgunned. Such firepower had rarely been seen in a civilian situation.

As the siege developed, conditions grew increasingly dangerous for those both inside and outside the compound. Inside the ranch, there were at least six decomposing bodies and sanitary conditions were deteriorating. Koresh spent much of his time building fresh fortifications and tightening his defensive perimeter. The Mighty Men spent hours every day working on new sniper positions, filling sandbags and making more gunports. When agents approached in tanks or in the recently arrived Bradley armoured fighting vehicles, they could see children being held up to the windows.

That prospect terrified Danny Coulson. "My very first concern was that the Davidians would exit the compound with a child in one hand and an AK-47 in the other," he said after the siege was over. "The only civilian unit that can eliminate the subject without eliminating the child is the HRT snipers. They can hit a quarter-inch target at two hundred meters."

Evidence given by Reno and Sessions to Congressional investigators after the siege indicates that, contrary to the views of many siege observers, the FBI did not have a "gung-ho" attitude to taking on the cult. The HRT sniper team could have shot Koresh anytime he appeared in their sights. But that option was well outside their rules of engagement. Instead of going in with guns blazing, the strategy involved taking the greatest possible care in planning. By April its agents had travelled the world interviewing more than 60 former cult members looking for fresh insights into the mind of the cult leader and his lieutenants. In total it consulted a dozen psychiatrists and several more religious scholars in a vain attempt to anticipate the cult leader's likely course of action.

The Bureau tried every known negotiating strategy, from sending in videotapes made by family members and milk deliveries to the children, to allowing Koresh's lawyers into the compound. Its negotiaters exhausted every step in the book – and several that weren't – before deciding to fall back on chemical agents. The mission of the Hostage Rescue Team – its motto: "To Save Lives" – was to secure the surrender and arrest of all the adult members of the compound while providing the maximum possible security for the children inside. Around the perimeter Sessions and Coulson posted 90 agents from the FBI's regional Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams. By the end of the first week, the Mount Carmel compound had become an FBI specialist-operations theme park.

In the first four days, the FBI negotiators appeared to be having considerable success and Koresh released 21 children. But by March 5 the cult leader was on the telephone declaring in admonitory tones: "My children are different than those others."

Two days later, after the command post offered to send in a requested milk delivery in exchange for more children, the cult leader rebutted: "You are dealing with MY biological children now." The children of other cult members were ordinary mortals and could be dispensed with, but as the Son of God Koresh was convinced that his progeny possessed divine status.

Coulson and Jamar aimed to restrict the activities of those inside the compound by depriving them of any real freedom of movement. The FBI also intended to make compound life increasingly uncomfortable. At the same time Floyd Clark and Jamar insisted that the Bureau had to calm the near hysterical atmosphere in the immediate aftermath of the shoot-out.

At an early stage they decided to explain the FBI's rules of engagement to everyone inside. Using the newly installed loudspeakers, the FBI announced that the rules dictated that its agents could only act in self-defence, or in defence of

another. Before they could shoot, they had to have good reason to believe that they or another person was in danger of death or grievous bodily harm. This meant that the Bureau's snipers were not allowed to shoot Koresh even if they had him in their sights. The snipers themselves were constantly at risk. "All our positions were chip shots for them," Coulson told *Time* magazine, "an easy head shot."

Sessions now approved a series of steps designed to show the FBI's strength, while denying the benefit of cover to those inside. One by one, FBI armoured personnel trucks moved away vehicles which had been scattered around the compound. A fence which Koresh had erected in front of the compound door was also partially dismantled. At great risk, agents installed the FBI's own wire fence as a primary perimeter. Bright spotlights were brought in to illuminate the compound at night. Instead of relying on the single telephone line used by Koresh and those he authorised to speak to the authorities, the loudspeakers were brought in so that Byron Sage and the other negotiators could communicate to all cult members.

The lights and speakers also aimed to disrupt the sect members' sleep, wearing down their resistance. In mid-March, the electricity supply was cut, forcing Koresh and Schneider to rely on a single, battery-powered radio for information about the siege outside as it was broadcast from the FBI press conferences.

By the second week all outgoing and incoming calls had been re-routed through an FBI switchboard. Koresh's direct access to the media was cut off. Deprived of the oxygen of instant publicity, the cult leader resorted to hanging messages scrawled on white sheets from the compound watchtower. One message, hung out in mid-March, stated, "FBI broke negotiations. We want press." The sheets, prominently displayed so they could catch the TV cameras, gave the besieged compound an outlandish, piratical air.

Active measures were now introduced to encourage those

inside to surrender. Loudspeakers played the sound of Tibetan chants, a move that brought a complaint from the Tibetan Embassy in Washington that the sanctity of religious mantras was being abused. The speakers relayed the sounds of rabbits screaming as they were slaughtered, interwoven with the thunder of jet planes flying overhead. The FBI played and replayed the sound of trumpets, assorted farmyard noises and even a dentist's drill. In a burst of apparent patriotism, Jamar played "Hail to the Chief", the fanfare that accompanies the arrival of the US president on official visits. "Jingle Bells" and Christmas carols by the singer Andy Williams were also part of the FBI's musical attack. Such psychological-warfare techniques had been used successfully before – in Panama in 1989 when invading US troops had surrounded the Vatican Embassy where deposed dictator Manuel Noriega was hiding out. Noriega held out for eleven days until he eventually succumbed. Would Koresh do the same?

With the home videos, the FBI sent in letters from family members begging their relatives to come out. They offered "good faith" gestures, such as deliveries of fresh drink and animal crackers for the children.

The Waco task force at the J. Edgar Hoover building had considered and quickly rejected a direct assault on Mount Carmel. The danger of heavy casualties to agents and children alike was too great. The "A"-team planners thought about using water cannon, but there was no armoured fire truck available. Anyway, water might cause the frail wooden structure to collapse, injuring children and destroying vital evidence.

The task force considered tunnelling into the compound. Again there were dangers, this time to FBI agents if the tunnels collapsed. The idea was finally rejected as impractical.

Reno agonised over the best way in. One night during the siege she awoke with a start at 4am. Why couldn't the FBI use helicopters to fly into the compound and bring all the

children out? The next day she put the query to the "A" team. They said the helicopters would get shot down.

Sessions, too, became deeply involved. By an uncanny coincidence, the FBI director had a long association with Waco. He had been born in Texas and was a graduate of Waco's Baylor University. Bob Sheehy, the city's present mayor, had been his campaign manager during his 1969 bid for a seat on the City Council. The FBI chief had lived in the city for a total of seventeen years during the 1950s and 1960s, serving as a City councillor.

At one point during the tense and frustrating siege, Sessions allowed his emotions to get the better of his judgement. He suggested that he himself should fly down to Waco to negotiate personally with Koresh. The idea was quickly rejected by his advisors who warned diplomatically that it would disrupt ongoing negotiations.

In Waco the days went by. After their initial success, the negotiators were struggling with Koresh. The man was a nutcase. Sage, Dietz and the others felt instinctively that Koresh was not like any other criminal. He was a killer, certainly. He was a child molester and sexual predator. He was unbalanced. But he seemed genuine about the Coming End. "All he wanted to do was talk about the Seven Seals, which herald the Apocalypse in the biblical book of Revelation," said one siege official wearily.

Koresh ranted for hours about the Bible. He did not seem to understand that, unlike his own followers, the FBI negotiators would not be swayed by his esoteric religious rhetoric. By the end of March, after four weeks of virtual stalemate, Dr Murray Miron, a Syracuse University psychology professor and one of the Wise Men tasked by the FBI to analyse the cult leader's personality, had decided that talking was a waste of time: "There were no negotiations, ever. These were one-sided delusional tirades from a psychopathic paranoid. He was not prepared to surrender. It was as simple as that."

Two distinct personalities emerged. One minute Koresh

was charming, caring and even remorseful about the four ATF men he had killed during the February shoot-out. The next minute he was violent, threatening and abusive.

At first Byron Sage adopted the kind, gentle tack, allowing the cult leader to ramble on at length. Within a week it became clear that Koresh exercised total control over the others. "You were dealing with one mind, not a hundred or so. That was the amazing thing," one FBI agent observed.

Koresh let those residents he considered disloyal or a hindrance go. The others were persuaded by guilt and loyalty to stay. The cult leader told them that if they left, they were deserting God.

With enough essential supplies inside the compound to last more than a year, things began to look bleak for the negotiators. As the days passed by and March turned to April, Koresh showed less interest in talking to the negotiating team. So the team changed tack.

They began by calling him Vernon instead of David. They hung up on some of his biblical tirades. They accused him of being a child abuser. They gave him a bad press at the daily media conferences, which they knew he monitored like a hawk. By now it was apparent that no more hostages were coming out, and it was time to up the ante.

Meanwhile, the besieged cultists grew more confident. Some began to walk outside the compound; others smoked cigarettes on the roof. Promises of surrender were repeatedly made. Then they were repeatedly broken.

Each day, Jeff Jamar struggled to weigh up the views of the Wise Men, the negotiators under Byron Sage and Rogers Hostage Rescue Team. While the negotiators racked their brains for ways to coax and cajole Koresh out peacefully, the Hostage Team developed a range of contingency plans for storming the building.

Jamar sat and listened. He spoke to Coulson. He spoke to Potts. He listened some more. Intelligence from inside the plant, furnished care of covert listening devices, indicated

the cult's resolve. Nothing was working. Nothing was moving.

It was time for a re-think.

When Sessions came to her office with the plan to use chemicals, Reno listened carefully, and then demanded answers to a whole score of questions. For the Attorney General, the "threshold question" was whether gas would cause permanent injury to the children. "I did not even want to consider the matter further if we could not be certain about this factor," she recalled.

The FBI assured her it wouldn't harm them. Reno insisted on further checks. So Sessions arranged a conference at the Hoover building with Dr Harry Salem, a medical specialist with expertise in toxicology and the side effects of chemical agents. Salem was chief of the Life Sciences department at the Defence Department's Edgewood Arsenal in New Jersey. He was the best tear-gas expert in the country.

In a lengthy meeting Dr Salem methodically outlined a series of case studies to convince Reno that tear gas was harmless. The discussions over the use of gas, and the best types to be deployed, lasted more than a week. Reno agonised while Sessions and Clarke coaxed and persuaded.

There were, the FBI explained, a range of chemical options. In the view of Salem and others, the least harmful was CS gas, named after Ben Carson and Roger Staughton, its two American inventors. Sessions was particularly confident that CS would provide the answer. He pointed out that the name itself was misleading and had unnecessarily sinister public relations overtones. CS came in powder form which Sessions smugly pointed out was "not a gas at all, but a particulant".

The idea, Sessions told Reno, was that the gas could be used to restrict access to certain parts of the compound, thereby reducing the area under the cult's control. That would best meet the aim of forcing cult members out of the compound with the least possible risk. The gas was a low-toxicity non-lethal irritant with no known long-term harmful side effects. Dr Salem explained that it was a "lachrymator",

its main effects being to cause the target's eyes to burn, the eyelids to blink uncontrollably and the nose to run. It had been tested on US army troops. Anyone subjected to it would be forced to run outside. It was simply the safest and most effective tear-gas agent available. Once the decision had been made to escalate the pressure by introducing chemical agents into the compound, CS gas was the only option.

The FBI considered the dangers of fire. Internal studies by their own laboratory staff and work at the Edgewood Arsenal indicated that CS gas could not cause fires. At Waco this was a vital consideration; Sessions knew that any fire, whether started by accident or due to arson, would almost certainly set off the huge stockpiles of ammunitions and explosives which Koresh had acquired. The consequences of such a pyrotechnic display were unthinkable.

Sessions was right that CS gas itself was not flammable. But he knew that some methods used to deliver it could involve accelerants or inflammatory materials as the propellant used in the firing mechanism. The FBI therefore had to rely on a delivery system which was non-flammable.

After consulting with Salem and its own laboratory division, the tactical commanders at Waco opted for a twin-track delivery system. When tear gas was finally used it would be sprayed into the compound in nineteen fifteen-second bursts. But there were many areas the spray wouldn't reach, so Jamar and Rogers, the Hostage Rescue Team commander, agreed that small metal projectiles containing CS gas would be fired into windows which posed a particular danger as sniper firing positions. Thus on April 19 some 300 CS projectiles would be shot into the compound.

Reno also consulted the military about possible ways of resolving the siege. One morning in mid-April the Attorney General walked into the conference room at the J. Edgar Hoover building and was introduced to Colonel Jerry Boynkin, the commander of Delta Force, the US Army's elite Special Operations unit and counterpart to Britain's Special Air Service

(SAS). At Boynkin's side was General Peter Schoomacher, a former Delta Force chief. The two commanders had flown to Washington from Fort Bragg in North Carolina, where they ran the secret headquarters of Delta Force.

Reno listened carefully as the two senior Army men gave her their views. In principle, Boynkin and Schoomacher saw nothing wrong with the Bureau's proposal to end the siege using CS gas. However, Delta Force did have one suggestion. Instead of an incremental use of tear gas, in which first one room, then another would be "shut down" by chemicals, they argued strongly that the gas should be pumped into all parts of the compound simultaneously. That way, Koresh and his most dangerous lieutenants would be taken by surprise, giving them nowhere to hide.

However, Reno now asserted her authority and flatly overruled them. She opted for a gradual approach over time as the best way to guarantee the safety of the women and children. It was a critical miscalculation. Had the Attorney General accepted the Delta Force suggestion, the outcome at Waco might have been different.

The task force intelligence collators in Waco and Washington were quick to note that Koresh had stockpiled sufficient gas masks to reduce the impact of the CS attack. "By everybody's description ... they could last for gas masks for some time, but it would be so uncomfortable that they would come out," Reno later insisted. Attorney General Reno was supremely confident of this view because both her civilian and military advisors agreed on it. "Based on what the commanding officers of Delta Force told us and what the HRT team told us, the gas was going to be so uncomfortable that they would come out rather quickly. Some would be more immune to it than others. They would have gas masks. We knew they had gas masks, and that might give them a longer time before they came out. But they would come out."

The military and the HRT insisted that Koresh would be forced to leave the building sooner or later. Certainly, he and

a few lieutenants might try to retreat to a cinder-block bunker they had built on the ground floor. If they made it, they could last three days. Maximum.

After these consultations were complete, Reno laid down the final ground rules for the Waco operation. The Attorney General directed that if at anytime during the execution of the plan Koresh or his followers threatened to harm the children, the Hostage Rescue Team must cease gassing immediately and pull back. If the plan began to work and Koresh started to negotiate in good faith for his surrender, then the gassing should also stop.

Alternatively, if Koresh ordered his men to fire on the encroaching armoured engineering vehicles, the agents had the authority to return fire. Reno repeated the FBI's concern that Koresh might hold some of the children up against the windows and threaten to harm them if the attack continued: "I gave specific instructions that if anything like that should happen, we should fall back immediately."

In Washington the Waco Task Force commanders spent hours poring over a series of models of the compound which FBI technicians had built. The models had been constructed on the basis of detailed intelligence obtained from Robert Rodriguez, the ATF undercover agent who had successfully infiltrated the compound in the days leading up to the ATF's bungled February raid. Rodriguez had put together a detailed drawing of the inside of the compound. His rough plan was passed from the ATF intelligence directorate under David Troy to the Operations Center at the Hoover building and its Waco task force commanders.

The FBI had other ways of updating information from inside the compound. It used Koresh's repeated demands for deliveries of food, milk and other essential supplies as a means of smuggling in concealed listening devices. The covert devices were battery operated and could last several days at a time. They consisted of a battery power system, microphone and transmitter. Later, cult members were reported to have

uncovered the bugs and destroyed them.

Around the compound the FBI installed a series of heat sensors, designed to detect the movement of humans. The sensors, which worked using infra-red technology, were highly effective in detecting movement on the ground, and in the underground network of tunnels which the Mighty Men had constructed. The FBI needed to be sure that no-one entered or left the compound without their prior knowledge.

Jamar and Rogers also relied heavily on a surveillance plane that spent hours flying overhead monitoring activities inside Ranch Apocalypse. The plane had been flown down from Washington at the end of the first week, after it became clear that the siege might last months. A converted civilian Islander, it had been manufactured by Pilatus Britten-Norman, a British company in the Isle of Wight. It deployed infra-red technology and a low-light television camera to track cult members as they moved from room to room. Details of the surveillance operation remain a closely guarded secret, but the FBI certainly had the ability and technology to plant tiny fibre-optic microphones and cameras inside the walls of the compound.

The information, in sound and pictures, was relayed back to the command post at the Texas State Technical College. The aim of the Bureau's sophisticated intelligence-gathering operation was to glean as much hard information as possible about the precise location of everyone inside the compound. By eavesdropping on their conversations, it also helped to assess their morale. The FBI needed to know just where and when each of the armed guards slept and what reaction they might have to an armed attack.

These questions and others consumed the minds of Jamar and Rogers as they neared the day of the attack.

In Washington, Reno and Sessions had further important matters to consider. As the day of reckoning approached, Reno still wanted to know why the FBI had to go in at all.

"The primary question I asked again and again ... was, why now? Why not wait?" Reno was told that the cult's food and water could last as long as a year.

The Attorney General was especially interested in the water supply. The cult's water tanks were being monitored on a regular basis by the HRT support units. Could the cult be forced out by an artificially imposed drought? "I asked that the information about the water supply be checked and double-checked by observing the level in the water tanks," she said later. Reno had picked up intelligence from her own sources that suggested the cult's water supply might be low: "We went back in and with the ability of the FBI to determine the level of the water tank from a distance, we were advised that it continued to be replenished and it looked like they had enough supplies and water to last for over a year."

So they discussed sabotage. "We explored but could not develop a feasible method for cutting off their water supply," the Attorney General would later tell Congress. It was not clear why, if the FBI could monitor the water supply, it felt it impossible to sabotage it. A few rounds from an FBI sniper's bullet would surely have done the trick.

Reno requested that members of her staff, under Mark Richard from the criminal investigative division, be in hourly contact with the FBI. She herself, however, was not briefed every day. Reno asked Richard personally to interview the hostage negotiators at Waco. The Attorney General's right-hand man pumped the chief negotiator Byron Sage with question after question. After two and a half hours, Richard's assessment was that negotiations had reached a total impasse.

On April 12 Janet Reno finally accepted the FBI's advice that, short of allowing Koresh to go free, there was no way the cult leader was going to leave the Mount Carmel compound voluntarily. The idea that the FBI just drop everything and let him leave was, of course, unacceptable. He was a dangerous criminal who had participated in the pre-planned mass murder of federal agents. A peaceful resolution could not be

achieved by allowing the status quo to continue. The risk to the children and the agents on the scene continued to grow as each day passed.

With so many weapons and so much technology on show, the possibility of accidents inside or outside was also great. Reno's thinking was swayed by a near disaster in the final week of the siege. An FBI helicopter struck a wire during an operation to drop in a SWAT team to locate a trespasser near the compound. Incredibly, there were no fatal injuries. The military commanders from Delta Force took the view that the longer the Hostage Rescue Team and supporting units were on site, the higher the risk of loss of life due to accident. Sessions, Coulson and Rogers concurred.

There was also the unnerving prospect of the perimeter being breached. Since Reno had not herself examined the scene at Waco, she depended entirely on the FBI briefers. The Bureau's "A" team worked their pitch once more. Did the Attorney General really understand, they inquired, the full size of the compound, and the perimeter required to secure it? It was equivalent, they explained, to the area between Capitol Hill and the White House "and the same distance either way". People had been able to get in and out. Two journalists had already been arrested for trespassing there. One enthusiastic and certainly deranged cult supporter had actually managed to breach the FBI's security and get into the compound, much to the embarrassment of Rogers and Jamar. With the perimeter insecure, the FBI warned Reno that there were no guarantees they could prevent a lunatic group hostile to Koresh charging the compound and attacking the ranch's residents.

There was some basis for such a fear. The huge publicity generated by the siege had attracted not just the world's media, who were stationed at "Satellite City" by the checkpoint on the Farm Road 2491, but also a motley collection of fringe groups who had now gathered a couple of miles further back. The groups ranged from White Supremacist gangs

such as the Ku Klux Klan to enthusiasts from the National Rifle Association, the US gun lobbyists. They hung around with the rest of the curious public on Overlook Hill, the picnic spot about three miles from the ranch where the T-shirts and mugs commemorating the shoot-out were sold from the back of a dozen pick-up trucks and at temporary stalls. On a good day, when the prairie wind had not kicked up too much dust, an observer armed with powerful binoculars could make out the compound's tan metal-and-wooden structures amid the shimmering haze.

Instead of telling the FBI that if they could not secure the perimeter they should not be on the job at all, Reno appears to have been thoroughly taken in by this alarmist scenario. "There could be confrontations," she said. "And if you let the stand-off go on forever ... it could happen if you got some rambunctious group in there that wanted to square off against the Davidians, it could happen in any number of ways."

The military now began to worry about another critical factor. The sheer scale of the crisis had prompted Sessions to approve a recommendation by Rogers to commit the Bureau's entire Hostage Rescue Team to Waco. While this move was clearly justified by the large number of "hostages" involved, and the evident risk to their lives, it soon placed the Bureau's planners in grave difficulty. There was only one team. It had 50 highly trained special agents split into two groups of 25. They had to be at a constant state of readiness.

Significantly, it was the military commanders and not the FBI itself who brought this to Reno's attention. By the beginning of the critical week, starting on April 12 when Reno finally approved the tear-gas plan, the two HRT units had been in place for 44 days under very dangerous conditions. It was the longest period they – or any other law enforcement agency – had been forced to wait. Some commentators observed that the Waco siege had now gone on longer even than that other famous Texas siege, at the Alamo, which had ended in slaughter in 1836. As Reno put it: "The length of

time that these agents had been on the scene began to raise questions that they could not remain there much longer and still be in the state of readiness that should be expected of an HRT team."

Sessions also became acutely concerned about the "fatigue" factor. "It was our belief that this was pushing the outside of the envelope in regard to how long they [the HRT] should be deployed without a significant resumption of the training necessary to maintain their level of skill. This is the only Hostage Rescue Team and pulling them out for any purpose would have meant the loss of significant operational, tactical, rescue and medical capabilities, seriously weakening the law enforcement mission at the compound."

Here was the crux of the FBI's dilemma. The Hostage Rescue Team could not stay more than a few days longer. If it did, it would be unable to function effectively. On the other hand, the team could not be withdrawn from the compound. That, Sessions ruled, would represent an unacceptable reduction in tactical strength. The conclusion was inescapable: the FBI could not afford to wait much longer. In this fashion, the anticipated weariness of a handful of FBI agents dictated tactical decisions which would involve the lives of 80 cult members. The dilemma – and its tragic results – would quite possibly cost the FBI Director his job.

The fatigue of the Hostage Rescue team was, of course, to be expected. But why was there no back-up? There were two answers. The government had been caught out once before because of this problem. In August 1991, the HRT had been called to a prison siege in Talladega, Alabama. More than 120 Cuban prisoners took nine hostages during a riot and the HRT had been called in to tackle the problem. After a nine-day siege the HRT stormed in under cover of darkness. The assault took three minutes and the siege was successfully resolved with only one minor injury. It was a great triumph for the FBI, but the length of the siege exposed the fact that it had no back-up in case of a crisis erupting elsewhere.

The FBI had subsequently requested extra funds to train additional hostage rescue teams. But the Office of Management and Budget, which with Congress controls the purse strings of American government departments, turned them down. The logistical problem, that the HRT might have to deal with two sieges at once, or one siege that lasted weeks or even months, was swept under the carpet.

There was a second, deeper, reason for the difficulty Reno now found herself in. When General Schoomacher and Colonel Boynkin told her about the fatigue problem, Reno had asked, "Well, isn't there another team?" The military officers told her that, in the absence of an HRT back-up squad, there were just two alternatives: Delta Force itself, or a team of commandos from the US Navy which was on permanent standby for marine disasters. Delta Force would clearly have been ideal since it comprised hundreds of highly trained SAS-type commandos. But there were legal, constitutional and political objections to this proposal. This, in essence, was the critical problem from which all the others flowed.

Under American law there is an ill-defined principle known as *posse comitatus*, which allows the local sheriff or law enforcement officer to co-opt civilians or other non-police personnel to help him enforce the law. In the old days of the Wild West *posse comitatus* was the legal principle which allowed a local Sheriff to co-opt posses of men to ride with him in search of outlaws.

At Waco, the principle had a military significance. When law and order deteriorated so much that civilian agencies such as the police and FBI could no longer cope, *posse comitatus* (literally: force of the country) gave them a provision to call in the military.

In Britain just such a situation had arisen during the 1980 Iranian Embassy siege when, after authorisation from the Cabinet, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir David McNee had signed over temporary control of the incident to the Army. The eleven-minute operation that followed led to the

rescue of all surviving hostages and the arrest or "neutralisation" of the terrorists involved. The embassy had burnt to a shell, but not before the SAS had brought every one it wanted out.

In America, there were precedents too. The year before, after the controversial jury verdict in the Rodney King trial, the Los Angeles police and political authorities had called in the National Guard after widespread rioting in which more than 50 people died. Reno herself, faced with the re-trial of the four White Los Angeles police officers in 1993, knew she might have to repeat the action if the latest verdict went against King. So why didn't the Attorney General call in the military at Waco?

Her answer to congressional investigators failed to address the issue: "We explored the provisions of *posse comitatus* and became convinced that you could not use the Delta Force in a civilian situation. I asked at that time, well can't you send in SWAT teams or something like that? I'm not a law enforcement expert, but I was asking every question I knew to ask."

Perhaps if Janet Reno had been a "law enforcement expert" she would have seen that the tactical advantages of calling in the military outweighed the presentational problems of Delta Force commandos, America's most professional military killing-machine, storming a compound full of innocent women and children on live prime-time television.

Instead, she was forced to rely almost entirely on the advice of the FBI, an agency which itself had enormous vested interest in resolving the crisis successfully.

It is impossible to know exactly what Sessions told Reno when *posse comitatus* was discussed, but it is likely the FBI director insisted the job should be done by his own people. He recognised that any decision to bypass the FBI and use the military would have dealt a further stunning blow to the Bureau's standing.

There was one final important element in the Washington decision-making process. The Wise Men of Waco had been

busy. At Quantico Special Agents Douglas and Hazelwood had been poring over intelligence reports and had discussed the state of Koresh's mind with their ten outside experts. Once the FBI had persuaded Reno that the tear-gas option was the way forward, the Quantico unit sent out an urgent request for last-minute memos assessing Koresh. Park Dietz and Murray Miron were told to drop everything and rush out a final briefing paper. Both academics burned the midnight oil as D-Day approached.

In a key assessment, Professor Dietz concluded that the longer the siege went on the greater the danger would be to the women and children.

"I wrote a two-page memorandum the previous Saturday as to the prospects for a successful negotiation," he said. "My view was that the likelihood of negotiations ending in the successful surrender of the children and adults was remote. I advised that when critical supplies such as food and water became unavailable, David Koresh would have a higher tolerance to the suffering of the people inside than the government."

In other words, Koresh would let his followers starve to death, rather than surrender to the FBI. "There was no way we were going to let that happen to the children," Dietz said. He had already told the FBI that Koresh was delusional, deceptive and manipulative. "It had to do with what might appeal to him."

Dietz's memo was sent over the secure fax to the command post at Waco and the Operations Center in Washington. He never got a reply.

In Syracuse, Murray Miron was thrashing out his final assessment of the Koresh letters. One of America's most respected and experienced psycholinguists, Miron was having difficulty. The cult leader had sent out five letters during the siege. Three of them had been thrown contemptuously outside the front door. The other two were delivered more graciously, via his lawyer Dick DeGuerin.

The two final letters, dated April 10 and 11, were particu-

larly worrying. They were neatly written on lavender notepaper and had been dictated to one of Koresh's fifteen wives. But their message was sinister: Koresh was ranting in the voice of God:

> I offer to you my wisdom. I offer to you my sealed secrets. How dare you turn away My invitations of mercy ... Who are you fighting against? The law is Mine, the Truth is Mine ... I AM your God and you will bow under my feet ... I AM your life & and your death. I AM the spirit of the prophets and the Author of their testimonies. Look and see, you fools, you will not proceed much further. Do you think you have power to stop My will? ... My seven thunders are to be revealed ... Do you want me to laugh at your pending torments? Do you want Me to pull the heavens back and show you My anger? ... Fear Me, for I have you in My snare ... I forewarn you the Lake Waco area of Old Mount Carmel will be terribly shaken. The waters of the lake will be emptied through the broken dam.

The following day, Koresh sent another note. This time the tone had changed. There were no threats, more a sense of resignation and an offering of mercy. He seemed to be seeking rapprochement:

> My hand made heaven and earth, My hand shall also bring it to an end ... Your sins are more than you can bear. Show mercy and kindness and you shall recieve [sic] mercy and kindness ... You have a chance to learn my Salvation. Do not find yourselves to be fighting against Me ... Please listen and show mercy and learn of the marriage of the Lamb. Why will you be lost?

Koresh signed off in the name of Yahweh Koresh, Yahweh meaning God in Hebrew. Murray Miron concluded that Koresh would only come out on his own terms. With all that weap-

onry and manpower at his disposal, those terms were almost certain to be violent. "It is hard to believe that Koresh will abdicate his godhead for a limited notoriety and time behind bars," Miron advised.

Nonetheless, Miron committed himself on the crucial question. The cult leader, he concluded, "wishes to remain alive to further his cause. There is every indication in my mind that he is not prepared to commit suicide."

The Wise Men were well aware of the various threats Koresh had made to carry out the Jonestown option. At one point the cult leader had threatened to emerge from the compound clad in hand grenades, before blowing himself up in front of the television cameras. But he had chickened out at the last moment.

The contributions of Dietz, Miron and the other Wise Men were as significant as the fatigue of the Hostage Rescue Team in determining the unfolding pace of events. The central issue was this: would Koresh be provoked by an FBI tear-gas attack into orchestrating mass suicide?

As time went on, the prospect of another Jonestown seemed to recede. Cult members who emerged from the compound insisted it was not an option. Koresh said he wouldn't do it. The FBI and their Wise Men agreed.

After the fire Sessions was emphatic on this point. The psychologists had been certain. Anyway there was a contingency plan. "The possibility of suicide was likewise an issue," the FBI director recalled. "We continually considered that possibility throughout the ordeal. This is why we consulted with psychiatric and other experts who told us suicide was not likely – that Koresh would not commit suicide."

Koresh himself had indicated that he would not commit suicide. The prospect had been discussed four times with FBI negotiators. Four times Koresh had insisted it was not an option. One factor which persuaded the Wise Men was that Koresh talked constantly about the future. He spoke to Dick DeGuerin, his lawyer, about book and movie rights to the

Waco siege story. Sessions figured that since Koresh had successfully defended himself against criminal charges in the past, he might believe he could do so again this time.

Koresh continued to be very materialistic. The cult leader had been noticeably distressed when his "vintage" Ford Camero was damaged as the FBI's armoured vehicles towed it away. Perhaps he was thinking of using it after the siege was over.

Anyway, Rogers had planned all along for the possibility of a murder/suicide. The plan involved the use of the armoured engineering vehicles to smash escape openings into the compound. CS gas and stun grenades would be fired in, to act as a diversion for those wanting to escape. In truth, everyone, from Attorney General Janet Reno and FBI Director William Sessions down, was convinced that family values would save the day. They felt certain that the maternal instincts of those cult members who were mothers would put their children's lives before loyalty to Koresh. Nobody in authority understood that Koresh had long ago overridden such feelings. Nobody realised that he had made his people want to sacrifice themselves for his "lights".

Yet Reno still worried about a mass suicide. The FBI briefers told her about the psychiatric reports on Koresh. They added that even if there were a chance of mass suicide, that could happen at any time.

Finally, there was what Reno called "the worst case scenario". The Attorney General worried that Koresh "would do something terrible, like set an explosion". But Koresh had planned to destroy the ranch before. It was outside the FBI's control. He could be in there for six more months. He could be in there for a year.

On Monday April 12, therefore, Reno signed off on the final assault plan. The following Saturday, after Dietz, Miron and the other Wise Men had sent in their final reports, she spoke one last time with Sessions and the "A" team. Later that day the Attorney General met with Webster Hubbell, the acting Deputy Attorney General, and her assistant Mark Richard.

Janet Reno's last questions were about the sanitary and medical conditions. She was told that conditions inside the compound were so bad that solid human waste was being thrown out of the door in pails. Richard told her there was no end in sight. The costs of delaying further materially outweighed the risks of going in. At 7.30pm Reno announced the decision to go in the following Monday. "Let's go, let's do it," she said.

That Sunday Reno called the White House and spoke to Clinton. It was the first time the President had discussed the Waco crisis with his Attorney General. The two held a brief conversation. The president, preoccupied with the crisis in Bosnia, gave her fifteen minutes.

Reno outlined the FBI plan to her boss. Clinton replied that he supported her decision. "I said that if she thought it was the right thing to do, that she should proceed and that I would support it," he said later. The assault at Waco was on.

10

Fire and Blood

When the end came it took them six hours to die. Dawn broke over the Texas prairie, casting a suffused glow over the pink-ochre walls of Ranch Apocalypse. Inside the children were still sleeping, their drawings and alphabet pictures hanging on the walls beside them. At the gunports, the Mighty Men looked down on the FBI sniper positions.

At 5.55am on this, the 51st day of the siege, Byron Sage, the Bureau's star negotiator, picked up the telephone in the command post and dialled the ranch. Steve Schneider, another sleepless night behind him, heard the ring a few seconds later. It was with a sense of deep foreboding that Sage relayed, in a few simple words, the distillation of weeks of task-force deliberations.

In Washington, it was an hour later by Eastern Standard Time and the task force "A" team had assembled in the Operations Center. Sage's script had been carefully prepared. There could be no mistakes.

"Hello, this is Byron. We want you to surrender now. If you don't agree we're going to gas the compound." Sage heard the phone click. In a fit of rage, Schneider ripped the phone from the wall. The video monitors relayed pictures of the phone being hurled outside. There was no going back now.

Dick Rogers, commander of the Waco Hostage Rescue Team, gave the signal. The HRT radio network crackled into life. The driver of the first M60-A1 tank picked up the "Go" message five minutes later. Fitted with bulldozer blades and retractable booms, the armoured machine rumbled

ponderously forward. Then it smashed the first hole, just left of the front door.

In Washington Janet Reno thought of the children. She remembered, too, those endless discussions about CS gas. She thought of Dr Salem and his review of the toxicological effects of this non-lethal "particulant".

At his home in Fairfax County, Virginia, Stephen Higgins, the beleaguered ATF director, thought about Todd McKeehan, Conway LeBleu, Rob Williams and Steve Willis.

Inside his redoubt at Mount Carmel David Koresh thought of Apocalypse.

The armoured vehicles punched the first holes into the flimsy wooden structure. The CS gas was sprayed silently into the gaps. CS pellets were fired at first-storey windows. Rogers gave the go-ahead for loudspeakers to blare their message: "This is not an assault. Do not fire. If you fire your fire will be returned. Exit the compound now and follow instructions. You are responsible for your own actions."

The announcement was greeted by a burst of automatic gunfire. Inside David Koresh prepared for the end. The fragile building shuddered each time the vehicles rammed it. The children cowered and they and their parents donned gas masks as the acrid stench of CS gas began to swirl about inside.

Now Koresh moved among his people, away from a second- floor bedroom where a patch of dried blood marked the scene where a disciple had fallen dead in the February shoot-out. The would-be Messiah checked the gas masks, ensuring his disciples did not panic. "Are you alright?" he asked, his voice muffled through the plastic tube of his own mask. The cult leader struggled to control the incipient terror, to maintain normality.

Many gathered for a last Bible class or withdrew to read scriptures in the privacy of their own rooms. Some of the braver women continued doing the laundry. The little children, now all up, stayed on the first floor by their mothers' sides.

Steve Schneider, Koresh's trusted deputy, knelt in a ground-floor hallway, his ears straining through headphones, listening on a portable radio to the latest news about their impending doom. Perhaps Schneider was having doubts about the wisdom of ripping out the telephone. Schneider's 41-year-old wife, Judy, who had had a child by Koresh, was busy typing out the cult leader's final manuscript, interpreting the Seven Seals.

In the Washington Operations Center Sessions, Clarke, Potts and Gow waited anxiously. Some FBI agents were pacing the floor.

At 8am, an armoured CEV (civil engineering vehicle) extended its large battering ram upwards towards the wall on the first floor, punching a hole into the front of the compound. At the rear of the building, a second CEV hammered an opening on the same floor. Nozzles attached to the booms sprayed fifteen-second bursts of gas inside. The cultists opened fire. But their response was desultory. Altogether, less than 80 rounds would be fired at the encroaching vehicles that morning. Rogers, fearing for the children, decided not to implement the FBI rules of engagement, which would have allowed him to return fire. Instead, he switched tactics and ordered the insertion of gas throughout the entire compound. This was the plan Delta Force commanders Boynkin and Schoomacher had recommended, but by that time Koresh had been fully appraised of the FBI attack. For the second time in seven weeks, the opportunity of surprise had been compromised.

The vehicles responded by gouging a further nine holes in the walls; their tear-gas pellets striking one cult member in the face. The tear gas wafted from room to room. In one bedroom a ranch resident took off his mask, thinking the air was safe to breath. Within seconds his throat was burning, his eyes watering and his nose running.

The world watched the CNN live broadcast and waited. At 10.30am FBI Special Agent Bob Ricks addressed a news

conference at the Waco Convention Center to explain the Bureau's strategy: "We hope motherly instincts will take over and they will walk out with their children." Nobody asked how he could be so sure.

The cult members fought off the gas as bravely as they could. But strangely, there was no group discussion of how to respond to the assault. Perhaps the decision had already been made. Nobody was coming out.

Increasing the pressure, a huge FBI tank made a beeline for the cinder-block room where Jamar and Rogers hoped to find Koresh and Schneider. The tank shook the earth and then shook the whole building as it smashed through the front lobby, crushing a piano which Koresh had pushed up against the main door. Survivors said the tank also crushed a propane barrel causing the initial fire.

It was just after midday when an FBI sniper saw a male cult member bend down, make a sweeping motion as if throwing or spraying something and then cup his hand as if to light a match. Above the ranch, a hovering FBI helicopter picked up several separate sources of heat on its infra-red scanner. The three fire sites, one at either end of the complex, and a third in the middle, were also seen by two local TV journalists flying just outside the air exclusion zone. Minutes later, the first wisp of smoke puffed gently out of a hole in the lecture-hall wall on the north side of the compound. A tender slick of flame licked its way silently upwards. The prairie wind, which Janet Reno had never felt and had not taken into account in her calculations, fanned the incipient inferno.

The fire, assisted by dozens of kerosene lamps – in use since mid-March when the FBI had cut off the power supply – raced along the dry wooden floor, engulfing bundles of hay, which the Mighty Men had placed against the doors and windows. The blaze was also fuelled by the sheet-rock roof, held together by tar paper, and the bundles of paper, linen and cardboard which littered all three floors. The occupants of Ranch Apocalypse withdrew deeper into the 50-room

complex. It was dark inside; all the windows had long ago been barricaded against attack. Some huddled together or groped in blind terror for their loved ones. Others panicked in the growing heat, seeking a way out. The blaze erupted so quickly, there could be no time to rip the fire extinguishers from the walls. As the flames took hold, fanned by the brisk southerly wind, Bob Ricks watched the TV screen inside the Waco convention centre. It seemed to take minutes before the truth of what was happening dawned on everyone. There was a fire, but no one wanted to escape. "Oh my God," Ricks groaned, "they're killing themselves." At the command centre inside the Texas State Technical College Sage and his negotiating team were watching too.

At the back of the complex, a propane tank, used to store cooking gas, exploded in an orange ball of flame. The blast sent a shudder through the Mount Carmel area as it shot hundreds of feet into the air, billowing clouds of dense black smoke. Millions of viewers watched in horror as the Cable News Network continued to broadcast live pictures of the inferno.

In a first-floor room near the gymnasium, Renos Avraam, a 29-year-old Londoner, knew he didn't want to die. Like the others around him he was disoriented. The FBI had predicted long hours of wearing a gas mask would have a debilitating effect on cult members. Avvraam could hear screams and, he thought, the sound of gunshots inside the compound. People he knew and loved were dying around him.

In a crash of burning timbers, the ceiling above Avraam collapsed. The burning bodies of small children fell in flames around him. Avraam took a short run and dived through the nearest window, breaking the glass with his outstretched fists. He landed on a roof and rolled off it to safety.

"I had no idea where I was and how I would get out," he told the FBI later. "It was chance to a large extent. There was little time to think. I don't know why I was just one of so few to escape."

In the chapel, the heat and carbon monoxide were taking their toll. Huddled amid a small group, Derek Lovelock, a 37-year-old Briton, saw the hole made by the FBI vehicle. His right hand in flames, Lovelock sprinted out through the burning gap to safety.

The women and children were cowering together on the first floor. When the fire, or a blow from a battering ram destroyed the staircase, there was no way down. The flames reached some of the hundreds of thousands of bullets stored in the arsenal, causing them to explode.

In the fortified cinder-block room, 32 cult members gathered together for their final moments. In some parts of the complex the temperature was reaching 1,000° F. As the oxygen ran out, many began to die of asphyxiation, the soot from the smoke choking them to death. Others inhaled the flames. At 12.12pm an agent at the FBI command post called the Waco fire brigade. Some of those watching on live TV also rang the emergency 911 number. One distressed woman asked if any action was being taken. "I'm calling from Georgia," she said, "I'm appalled at this." Another 911 caller asked, "What are you waiting for? Those people are going to die out there."

Within ten minutes, two firetrucks had arrived at the FBI checkpoints. But they were detained for a further fifteen minutes before being escorted to the remains of the ranch. William Sessions had his fire contingency plan. He also had what he called "a very extensive medical treatment and evacuation plan". But the plan meant that neither firefighters nor equipment could be allowed anywhere near the compound, for fear of injury from the Davidian guns or exploding munitions. No-one seemed to have thought of providing armoured fire-fighting equipment.

As the handful of survivors emerged there were extraordinary scenes. The FBI agents left their tanks and rushed to help the few who came out. Yards from the front door, one agent grappled with Marjorie Thomas, a 30-year-old British

woman. Thomas was in flames. As the agent struggled to put the fire out, she turned back towards the burning compound, as if drawn by some magnetic force to rejoin her dying friends. One man appeared on the roof, waving his hands in surrender. A second survivor dragged out a third.

FBI Special Agent Byron Sage knew it was the end. He couldn't watch. Twenty-five minutes into the fire he picked up the microphone and begged them to come out. "Those of you remaining inside the compound, attempt to exit by any means possible. Walk towards the voices. Exit in any fashion that you can." Then, as the reality of the tragedy became apparent: "Get in a position of safety and the agents will attend you. Exit the compound as readily as you can."

As Sage looked across from the negotiating room, he could see the first floor collapse and the watchtower tilt and fall.

In a last-ditch effort, Jamar and Rogers thought again of the children. Ignoring the continuing risk from fire or explosion, the Waco fire-fighting teams were called in to direct water pumps onto the front left side of the compound. As they did, an FBI tactical team dashed in to search for surviving children or any others. They explored an underground tunnel, wading waist-deep in water filled with human waste and rats. They searched a series of concrete bunkers, risking gunfire or the possibility of booby traps. When they got to the buried school bus, it was free of fire. They hoped to find the children, but the bus was dark and empty.

Sage turned off his microphone and walked outside. The blaze was burning fiercely and he could feel the warm heat on his face. He felt anger and sadness. He felt the tears. He felt, most of all, utterly helpless. Twenty-four years' FBI service behind him but he had seen nothing like this. He had spent much of the morning watching and hoping, relaying his pleas over the FBI loudspeaker system, trying to coax them out – realising they weren't going to come. "I knew those people were dying," he said. "You just wish there was something you could do. You felt so helpless."

11

The Promised End

"Is this the promised end?
– or image of that horror?" King Lear, Act V

The fire was out, but the political firestorm had only just begun. David Koresh, self-styled antagonist of Babylon, was dead. So were nearly 80 of his followers, among them 22 children. Byron Sage looked onto the burned-out remains of old Mount Carmel and fought back the tears. An FBI tactical team continued the desperate search of the underground bunkers. They were still looking for the children.

In the Task Force operations room at the J. Edgar Hoover building, Floyd Clarke, Doug Gow, Danny Coulson and the rest of the FBI's "A" team watched the tragedy unfold live on CNN television. In the command centre at Waco there was silence. Dick Rogers, commander of the Hostage Rescue Team, was frantic, looking for more survivors. Jamar supervised the arrest of those who'd escaped; Potts and Gow would need their evidence. Everybody knew it was the end. As the prairie wind swept away the acrid black smoke, the horrors began to reveal themselves.

On top of the cinder-block bunker, the charred remains of nine bodies lay crumpled together. Inside FBI scenes-of-crime experts found the grisly remains of another 34, including a mother with her arms still wrapped around her child, shielding her from the flames. The dire predictions of the would-be Messiah had come true. The prophecy of mass suicide, postponed since Passover 1992, had been fulfilled. Janet Reno's

nightmare scenario, dismissed by the Wise Men of Waco as implausible, had been realised.

Amid the gunfire, explosions and suffocating smoke, their deaths were varied. At least four of the Davidian children had been shot to death, perhaps in mercy killings to save them the agony of a fiery demise. Two had been killed by bullets in the head; two more by bullets to the chest.

Other cult members had sustained shrapnel injuries as munitions exploded in the super-heated bunker. They had also succumbed to suffocation and smoke inhalation. Those who had been asphyxiated had been trapped by falling debris as the walls of the bunker had collapsed onto them.

Inside the smoking cinder-block room some of the bodies were still intermingled. It was not until days later that they were identified as separate corpses. Altogether, 27 cult members had been shot.

The charred remains of David Koresh were discovered in the communications room, where negotiations had been carried out with the FBI. It took Dr Rodney Crow, head of the 40-strong dental disaster squad, nearly three weeks of checking against dental records before he could be certain the cult leader was dead. In the end, two teeth which Koresh had been missing since he was fifteen provided the final clue.

Koresh died from a single gunshot wound to the head. That bullet had entered the centre of his forehead and gone out about an inch to the right of the back of his skull. "It is not among the more frequently encountered suicide wounds," said Dr Cyril Wecht, an independent pathologist retained by the Davidians' families. The fire had consumed most of his body after death.

Steven Schneider's body was also found in the communications room. He had died from smoke inhalation but had also suffered a gunshot wound to the back of the head. The bullet had travelled upward through his head. "That as far as I'm concerned is not a self-inflicted gunshot wound," said Wecht. In all 27 bullet-wound cases, the bullet wounds had been

deliberate. A bullet exploding spontaneously in the heat could never have reached such velocity.

David Thibodeaux, a 24-year-old survivor, said in a prison interview that there had never been a suicide pact. Perhaps, he added, cult residents had shot themselves or others out of desperation. "People caught in a fire would rather take the easy way out," he said. David Jones, the postman who had received the tip-off about the ATF raid, was shot in the head. So was eighteen-year-old Shari Doyle. The Star of David necklace around her neck showed she had been one of the cult leader's many wives. Both bodies had been found on top of the bunker.

The intensity of the fire had made the post-mortems difficult to carry out. The pathologists at Tarrant County Medical Examiner's office in Fort Worth had never seen such destruction to human bone and tissue. In most cases bodies were so charred that only dental records could identify them. The pathologists could not be sure exactly how many people had died in the inferno. Bodies had meshed together and were mixed with rubble. Body parts from as many as 24 people might have been contained in four body bags.

Judy Schneider, who had named herself to negotiators as Judy Schneider-Koresh, was identified through fingerprint comparison. She was still typing the cult leader's treatise on the Seven Seals, when the compound burned down. Her preliminary cause of death was listed as traumatic thoracic injury.

Douglas Martin, self-styled Mighty Man and Harvard-educated lawyer who had helped Koresh in his campaign to win back Mount Carmel, was also dead. His body was found in the stage area, near the communications room. Martin's wife Sheila, though, had been one of the lucky 34 cult members released during the 51-day siege. Wayne Martin, their twenty-year-old son, was dead too, identified through dental records.

In the chapel, Raymond Friesoen, a 77-year-old Canadian, had died from smoke inhalation and carbon-monoxide

poisoning. On top of the bunker lay the burnt remains of Novelette Hipsman, wife of another Mighty Man, Peter Hipsman, who had been acquitted with Koresh in the 1988 attempted-murder case. She had died of a single gunshot wound to the head. Inside the bunker below were the grisly remains of Audrey and Abigail Martinez, thirteen and eleven years old respectively. Their bodies, along with many other children, were not buried in rubble, soil or dirt. They were buried in waist-deep piles of live ammunition shells which had survived the heat intact.

Mary Borst, 49, died in front of the concrete ammunition bunker. She had lacerations to the heart and lungs caused by gunshot wounds. Doris Fagan, a 60-year-old British Davidian, lay dead in the hallway near the men's quarters. Her death was due to smoke inhalation, although she too appeared to have a gunshot wound to her head. The body of one child was recovered still clutching a baby bottle bearing its name.

Winston Blake, another British cult member, died from a high-velocity gunshot wound to the head. He was 28. Peter Hipsman died from multiple gunshot injuries in the head and stomach. Their bodies had been buried in underground bunkers since the ATF raid on February 28.

The bodies of other Britons were also found. Alrick Bennett, 35, died from smoke inhalation with extensive charring. The pathologists also identified the remains of Susan Benta, 41; Stephen Henry, 32; Livingston Malcolm, 26; and Rosemary Morrison, 29, who died of smoke inhalation. Also dead were Juliete Martinez, 30; Floyd Houtman, 61, another Mighty Man who had been cleared in 1988 with Koresh; James Riddle, a 32-year-old Mighty Man; and Catherine Andrade, 24, of Canada.

The crime scene shifted as the human remains and forensic evidence were removed. The story of what happened during those final moments may never fully be known. From the moonscape of the ruined Davidian compound, the inquiry shifted to the Fort Worth Medical Examiner's office. From

there it moved again, to the FBI's forensic science laboratory in Washington. Dozens of scientists began poring over the evidence in a bid to reconstruct the official story. They were seeking clues to the guilt or innocence of the surviving cult members. They wanted to know which guns were fired, by who and at whom. Who had killed Rob Williams, Todd McKeehan, Steve Willis and Conway LeBleu? Who had set the fire that destroyed the compound? How did everyone die? The arson investigators were satisfied that the fire had been started intentionally by someone inside the building. Gallons of lantern fuel had been deliberately leaked from their containers which had been stabbed by what investigators believed was a screwdriver. "It looks like they said, to hell with it, took screwdrivers, punched 'em in and spread the stuff all over," said a member of the four-man independent arson inquiry team. "These were stabbed; they didn't even take the time to unscrew them."

The FBI's vehicles had provided the way out. The holes knocked in by the tanks were free of fire and smoke. The opportunity to escape had been presented. But it was simply not taken.

The Texas Rangers, assigned to the crime scene in the wake of the disaster, recovered 200 recognisable firearms, numerous gun parts and tools that could have been used to manufacture automatic weapons. Among the cache were semi-automatic and (illegal) fully automatic machine-guns and two .50-calibre weapons. Special Agent Davy Aguilera, back in the ATF's Austin field office, had been vindicated.

In Washington, the second-guessing had begun. In the aftermath of the tragedy President Clinton appeared to duck and weave before finally admitting that he had backed Reno's plan. The Attorney General herself responded to the political crisis by taking full responsibility. Reno, Higgins and Sessions were summoned to an emergency meeting of the House Judiciary Committee to explain what had gone wrong. Reno's performance outshone the others. She established herself as

a tough-minded, intelligent politician with an integrity and forthrightness that was refreshing in a city where buck-passing is a universal pastime.

"It was my call and I made it the best way I know how. The buck stops with me," Reno said after the fire. Her position as the first female Attorney General made her explanations of how she fought desperately to save the lives of the cult children sound as poignant as they were persuasive. She would emerge as a politician of integrity, a rare bird in Washington politics, prepared to put principle before self-preservation. Many regarded her refreshingly honest account of the final days of the siege as the finest example of American leadership since General Norman Schwarzkopf re-took Kuwait in the Gulf. She made Sessions and Higgins look weak and evasive.

Ronald Noble, the Assistant Treasury Secretary who had warned the ATF against their February raid, took charge of a wide-ranging internal inquiry. One of the few Clinton administration officials to survive the political fall-out of the disaster completely unscathed, Noble was asked by Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen to find out why the raid had gone ahead when cult members had been tipped off about their plans. The Treasury wanted to know why Koresh could not have been arrested when he was away from the heavily fortified compound. If the ATF agent in charge knew of Robert Rodriguez's warning about the tip-off, why did he decide to continue with the plan?

The element of surprise was what ATF director Higgins had promised Noble. "There is a public account by the ATF that the element of surprise had not been lost at the time the decision was made to go forward," said Noble, "There is an undercover agent's account of what happened which is in direct contradiction to that." Who was telling the truth?

To guarantee the inquiry's independence it was overseen by a panel of outside experts, comprising newspaper editor Ed Guthman, Los Angeles Police Chief Willie Williams and

Henry Ruth, the chief prosecutor in the Watergate inquiry during the 1970s.

In tandem with the Treasury inquiry into the ATF's handling of the raid, the Justice Department would examine the FBI's handling once it took over. There would be a third, joint Treasury–Justice report on how to respond to similar sieges in the future.

The disaster cast a pall of gloom over the head of FBI director William Sessions. Appointed in 1988, he still had four and a half years of his ten-year term of office remaining. Two weeks after the tragedy Sessions returned to Waco and gave a press conference at the Texas State Technical College. "We have to be able to explain ourselves well to the American people," he said. "The President of the United States can ask me to step down, and he can explain to Congress why he did it." Sessions believed the Bureau had been made a scapegoat for the disaster. "People expected us somehow to work a miracle, and all I wish is that we had," he said. In answer to a question, Session confirmed that he had received a letter from David Jewell in 1992 warning about the child abuse at Mount Carmel. Sessions added that future training of the Critical Incident Negotiating Team would include intensive theological and related studies to prepare for potential sieges with other religious cults. He said nothing about the need for an extra Hostage Rescue Team.

Park Dietz, Murray Miron and the rest of the Wise Men returned to their academic studies. Miron was forced to come to terms with the fact that he had got Koresh wrong. The widely touted prediction that the cult leader would not take the "Jonestown option" had been a fatal miscalculation. Park Dietz, back in his professor's chair at the University of Los Angeles, was left to reflect on why the FBI had ignored his advice by failing to adopt a consistent negotiating strategy and allowing the ATF to retain a provocative presence at the compound perimeter. Dietz was also left to consider how the Wise Men had got the cult leader so wrong. Perhaps there

had been clues to his true character in Dietz's own studies of the berserker. Certainly Koresh, with his long-held grudge against society, his obsession with exotic and advanced weapons and by his eventual decision to take the lives of himself and his own family, seemed to share some of the berserker's characteristics. Perhaps the blaze was a super-elaborated suicide in which the cult leader sought to confirm his own rejection of the outside world by aggrandising his own death. Perhaps he had decided to engage in "suicide by proxy" by slaying his whole "family" before killing himself. Certainly he read survivalist paramilitary literature and built a huge home arsenal, both features of what Dietz had classified as the "commando" type berserker. Certainly he had in his early life been a loner removed from the support of institutions, friends and family. And certainly there had been a final trigger – the attempts by the ATF and the FBI to take him prisoner – that had sparked the conflagration. Dietz knew that such analysis was not academic. If the Wise Men had read Koresh right some of those women and children might still be alive today. After all, Dietz had rarely known of a berserker who had not contemplated suicide. Koresh was a collector of injustice and, in the final days, saw no way out.

In the community of Elk, around the Mount Carmel site, the tanks, the media and the law enforcement investigators were all gone. The roadblocks were lifted. For the likes of Bob Cervenka, the neighbour who had first told Davy Aguilera about the sound of machine-gun shots in the night, the whole thing was like a bad dream. Life in the East Texas prairie slowly returned to normal. The putrid smell of fire, blood and death finally lifted, blown away on the ever-present prairie wind.

At the Mount Carmel compound, the federal investigators have moved out and the bulldozers moved in. The Texas Health Department has declared the area quarantined after discovering large portions of it were strewn with rubbish and

human faeces. The bulldozers have filled in the holes and separated the debris into piles of metal, masonry material and combustibles. The signs marking Double EE Ranch Road at the front of the compound were ordered taken down before they were removed by souvenir hunters. In this manner 50 years of Branch Davidian history, and the grisly evidence of one of America's biggest tragedies, have been quietly obliterated. David Koresh and the cult of evil are no more.

A Note on Sources

Wherever possible, I have relied on court and official documentation to describe events in Waco and Washington.

The evidence of ATF Special Agents Davy Aguilera and Earl Dunagan can be found in unsealed affidavits lodged in the records department of the Waco State Court.

My account of life at Mount Carmel draws heavily on affidavits prepared by former Australian cult members Marc Breault, Bruce and Lisa Gent, and Allison and Ian Manning.

Chapters Four, Five and Six draw on 200 pages of court transcripts of evidence given by David Koresh and George Roden during the 1988 trial and produced by the Brazos court reporting service in Waco. Gary Coker, David Koresh's former attorney, provided additional material from his files.

The office of Dr Bruce Perry, head of psychiatry at the Texas Children's Hospital, was kind enough to supply a copy of his team's report on the 21 Davidian children who left the ranch during the siege.

Details of the decision-making process in Washington in Chapter Nine are partly based on evidence given to the House Judiciary committee by Janet Reno, William Sessions and Stephen Higgins.

Finally I would like to acknowledge the work of Curt Suplee of the *Washington Post*, who has written exclusively on beserkers and other mass murderers.

Fire and Blood

The True Story of David Koresh and the Waco Siege

David Leppard

In April 1993, after a 51-day siege, David Koresh's cult compound – dubbed 'Ranch Apocalypse' – went up in flames, killing the self-proclaimed Messiah and up to 80 of his followers. Top British investigative journalist David Leppard followed the story from the outset.

Fire and Blood looks in depth at David Koresh: what made him into the seriously disturbed paedophile and murderer he undoubtedly was? And what was the secret of his charismatic hold over the members of his cult? Leppard has talked exclusively to top FBI psychological profilers and has pieced together an extraordinary portrait of a man who conforms to a very precise type of mass-murderer. He also discloses the harrowing details of the child abuse and sexual ritual which Koresh masterminded.

Koresh's manipulative dismantling of the human bonds between his followers – mothers and children, husbands and wives – made them fatally reliant on him and also led to tragic errors of judgement by the FBI, unable to believe that mothers would let their children die when they attacked the compound.

Meticulously researched from evidence which is only just emerging, **Fire and Blood** presents a chilling picture of a terrible law-enforcement blunder, and underlines the impotence of the authorities in the face of a pathological killer hell-bent on self-destruction.

Cover design by Fielding Rowinski

£5.99 net

True Crime

ISBN 1-85702-166-5

9 781857 021660