

“Not the Jesus I Love”:  
Waco Residents Perception of the Branch Davidian Conflict

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**Abstract:** While several historians have focused on the effects of government intervention on the Branch Davidians, little is known about the perceptions of Waco residents on the Branch Davidian conflict. Through focusing on Letters to the Editor sent in to the *Waco Tribune Herald* before and after the conflict, one realizes that the perception of Waco residents initially differs very much from the negative portrayal of the Branch Davidians in publications outside of Texas. When Waco residents realize, however, that the perception the outside media is forming is also against Waco, they appear to band together in order to keep a united front.

**Keywords:** Waco, residents, perception, Branch Davidians

On April 19, 1993, the 51-day standoff between the FBI and the Branch Davidians at Mount Carmel, a compound located close to Waco, Texas, came to what the *Waco Tribune Herald* described as a “fiery end.”<sup>1</sup> The *Waco Tribune Herald*, along with many major newspapers and magazines outside of Texas, thrived during the standoff, covering every update in the negotiations. Reporters flocked to Waco, setting up a temporary city that they called “Satellite City,” which was full of motor homes that reporters set up to keep track of the events.<sup>2</sup> Many outside of the Waco area watched with curiosity, wondering what would happen next in the standoff. Reporters became true residents, with Satellite City receiving regular garbage collections as well as having an unelected mayor.

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<sup>1</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Cover. April 20, 1993

<sup>2</sup> George Church, “The Branch Davidians: The End is Near,” *Time Magazine*, (April 26, 1993)

The Waco residents who wrote letters to the Waco Tribune Herald, by this point, had grown tired of the constant coverage. The main grievance that these residents had was concerning the outside media's perception of Waco. Originally, the Branch Davidians were described as the cult near Waco, but over time, the cult was described as the cult in Waco. They disliked the sweeping generalizations that were made by the media about Waco. One Waco resident remarked that, "some far displaced observers appear to imply that Waco, being a very religious town is fertile ground for apocryphal atrocities. Ultimately, that's a slur against all believers—guilt by the most vague of association."<sup>3</sup> Many Waco residents agreed that the opinion that these people held of Waco was inaccurate; and following the fire, 66.8% of residents surveyed after the siege believed that Waco's image would be more favorable a year or two later.<sup>4</sup>

For Waco residents, this crisis was more than just a spectacle; it was an event that, in essence, polarized the town. While many Waco residents supported the ATF, there were also many Waco residents who disagreed with the actions of the FBI and ATF. They, instead, felt that it was an attack on their rights, and that the FBI and ATF should have left the "Branch Davidian problem" to local Texas authorities. In a poll taken before the fire, Waco-area adults were asked whether they thought the ATF did a "good job or a poor job of conducting the raid on Mount Carmel."<sup>5</sup> Out of all the residents surveyed, 49.9% thought that the ATF did well and 40.5% thought that the ATF performed below maximum efficiency. As early as days before the fire, this

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<sup>3</sup> "A Religious Town." *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 7, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Marc Masferrer, Waco's Residents Tell World It's Not Our Fault, *Waco Tribune Herald*, April 22, 1993

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Bulmahn, Poll: Image Won't Change, *Waco Tribune Herald*, April 25, 1993

division of opinion prevailed in the Letters to the Editor, with relatively equal number of residents for and against the ATF's actions. Following the fire, however, 82% of Waco residents thought the FBI "did the right thing by trying to end the standoff by pumping tear gas into the compound," and only 12% of the residents thought it "was the wrong thing to do."<sup>6</sup> This is much higher than a poll taken of New York residents, which found "two-thirds approval of the tear-gas assault."<sup>7</sup>

The change that occurred among Waco residents may have been due to the escalation of articles regarding the outside perceptions of Waco. The amount of articles regarding outside perceptions of Waco escalated, however, in the last half of the standoff when the Waco Tribune Herald published an article discussing a British reporter's opinions of Waco. The reporter said that, "Waco is a grungy, one-horse town where the horse has died."<sup>8</sup> When Waco residents started to realize that this was how the media perceived not only Mount Carmel but Waco, they started to become more defensive. Especially since, according to a Waco Tribune Herald poll, "only 5 percent of Waco people even know anybody out there." While they originally may have felt disconnected, the media's scrutiny caused them to become more united.

Additionally, the shift in the Waco Tribune Herald's interpretation of the standoff may have also contributed to this change in opinion, at least among Waco Tribune Herald readers. At the start of the standoff, the Waco Tribune Herald published multiple articles and editorials that put a strong emphasis on David

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> "Waco," *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 28, 1993

Koresh as a person and gun control as the solution to the “Branch Davidian problem.” Most Waco residents were against gun control and, in turn, interpreted the Waco Tribune Herald’s articles to mean that this standoff was a sign that the federal government was trying to assert its power over Waco. Residents were frustrated because they felt the Waco Tribune Herald was blaming the NRA and guns instead of blaming David Koresh for the actions of the Branch Davidians.<sup>9</sup>

Within the last month of the standoff, the Waco Tribune Herald focused their attention on David Koresh and his abuse of children. As more articles on the abuse of children were published, the majority of the letters to the editor were in favor of the ATF and the federal government’s actions. Though it is arguable that the Waco Tribune Herald may have a bias, this bias is not easily recognized because supporting and opposing views of the ATF were both selected for publication.

Through examining local resident perceptions as evidenced by the Waco Tribune Herald, it is evident that an evolution of opinion occurred. While the Waco Tribune Herald may not represent the full range of local public opinion on the subject, it provides an essential window into local public opinion at the time. While Waco resident opinions were originally divided in regard to whether they agreed with the ATF’s actions or not, the media’s criticism of Waco led to residents supporting government efforts so that they may appear more unified as a town.

Though historians have discussed the Branch Davidian siege itself in great detail, no historian has yet investigated the changing perceptions of the Waco residents of the Branch Davidian conflict. Historians such as Todd Kerstetter have

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<sup>9</sup> “Blame the NRA,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 17, 1993

looked into the reasons behind why the Branch Davidians made the United States government so uneasy and what motivated the attack by the ATF on February 28, 1993. He argued the “West had limits when it came to religious freedom. American society still did not tolerate barbarians in the garden.”<sup>10</sup> Another historian, Kenneth C. G. Newport argued the government acted in the best interests of the people in the area and that the government had no idea that the Branch Davidians would try any form of mass suicide. He argues that the Branch Davidians, unknown to the government, had a “theological rationale” for mass suicide. He explained that the government reports were “unassailable evidence” that they had not known prior to the siege that the Branch Davidians would try to kill themselves, and he aimed to dismiss all the conspiracy theories that stated that the government had started the fire, and not the Branch Davidians.<sup>11</sup> In responding to Kenneth C. G. Newport’s work, historian Stuart Wright explains that while Kenneth C.G. Newport dismissed the conspiracy theories, the evidence that the government provided was all but “unassailable.” Wright explains that Newport’s argument “principally [addresses] conspiracy theories,” and fails to explore the possibility that the tear gas may have been a possible cause of the fire. He explains that the tear gas forms “flammable, vapor-air mixtures in larger volumes” and that it could be an “explosion hazard in confined space.” In order to understand the standoff as a whole, it is important to observe the evolution of opinion among Waco residents.

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<sup>10</sup> Todd Kerstetter, *God's Country, Uncle Sam's Land*, Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2006: 125

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Wright, “Revisiting the Branch Davidian Mass Suicide Debate,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 13, no. 2 (November 2009): pp 4

Waco, Texas, according to the 1990 Census, had a population of around 189,123.<sup>12</sup> It is described even on the Waco website as having a “strong religious community that dates back generations.”<sup>13</sup> The majority of the people in Waco are Christian and Waco itself boasts “more than 200 places of worship representing more than 30 denominations.”<sup>14</sup> These places of worship are predominantly Church of Christ, Baptist and Methodist churches, which makes sense given Waco’s history.<sup>15</sup> The first church established in Waco was established by a circuit rider in 1850 and the First Baptist Church of Waco was established in 1851.<sup>16</sup> Waco is also the home to Baptist-affiliated Baylor University.

Waco is described by its residents as a religious town. By looking at the views of the residents in the Waco Tribune Herald, the town’s religious traits are revealed. Many of the Letters to the Editor that were sent often referenced scripture. In Dorothy Anderson’s letter, she said that “even though ATF agents walk through the valley of the shadow of death they shall fear no evil, for they shall prevail.”<sup>17</sup> There were children that wrote to the Waco Tribune Herald about the conflict that shared a similar outlook with their parents, and their editorials were also religiously based.

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<sup>12</sup> Waco Chamber of Commerce. "Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce." *Waco We Do*. Available from <http://www.wacochamber.com/demographics.php>. Internet; accessed 16 March 2011

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Waco Tribune Herald. "Faith Directory." *Waco Churches*. Available from [http://www.wacotrib.com/accesswaco/faith\\_directory/](http://www.wacotrib.com/accesswaco/faith_directory/). Internet; accessed 16 March 2011

<sup>16</sup> Waco Chamber of Commerce. "Greater Waco Chamber of Commerce." *Waco We Do*. Available from <http://www.wacochamber.com/qualityoflife.php>. Internet; accessed 16 March 2011

<sup>17</sup> "Psalm for ATF," *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 23, 1993

Susan Duty's editorial explained "Jesus heals not kills. Jesus loves not hates," and that Koresh was "not the Jesus [Susan] love[d]."<sup>18</sup>

Waco is also a fiscally conservative town, and does not like additional federal government or state taxes, and many of the residents seem opposed to big government. During the Branch Davidian standoff, some other major topics of discussion within the "Letters to the Editor," were Clinton's plan for universal healthcare and the mounting federal deficit. Many residents wrote letters similar to Michael Holden's letter, which explained that, "raising taxes on the wealthy does not inspire companies or entrepreneurs to hire more people or start new businesses."<sup>19</sup> Resident Len Hobbs also characterized the quintessential Waco political beliefs when he said the "United States does not owe any person, young or old, black or white, stupid or intelligent, liberal or conservative, a cradle-to-grave income, education, health care, welfare or lunch money or any other benefit."<sup>20</sup> Another Waco resident was eager to point out that the Waco Tribune-Herald failed to mention that, "Clinton-Rodham had only a 27 percent approval rating among voters in Texas."<sup>21</sup> The Waco residents' reaction to higher taxes, the passing of a healthcare bill, and the mounting deficit indicate that they preferred to have a less intrusive government. Many argued that they could spend their money better than the government was spending it and as a result, this may have made some residents especially resistant to government actions, such as those of the ATF. They had more

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<sup>18</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 5, 1993

<sup>19</sup> "Raising Taxes," *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, April 22, 1993

<sup>20</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 23, 1993

<sup>21</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 9, 1993

faith in the ability of local officials to solve local problems, and appeared to dislike intrusion.

On February 27, 1993, the day before the ATF raid, the Waco Tribune Herald published the first part of a seven-part series entitled “The Sinful Messiah.”<sup>22</sup> It was on the cover page of the Waco Tribune Herald and provided insight into the practices of the Branch Davidians and their leader, Vernon Howell. Reporters spoke to a former Davidian, Marc Breault, who was described as a “one-time confidant of Howell’s.”<sup>23</sup> He explained that Vernon Howell, who changed his name to David Koresh while in California, was more threatening than Waco residents had thought. The “Sinful Messiah” exposé explained that after looking at former cult members and statements of law enforcement they concluded that Koresh had “abused children physically and psychologically, boasted of having underage sex in the cult, claimed the divine right to take every man’s wife, and had at least 15 so-called ‘wives’.”<sup>24</sup> The exposé also included an article that argued that while Australia was getting justice for the children in the Branch Davidian compound, the Branch Davidians were never put on trial in the United States.<sup>25</sup> Despite these strong allegations against Koresh and his followers, there were no Letters to the Editor written on this topic the following day. Normally, residents would write letters and they would be published the following day. This may have been because Waco residents did not feel a strong connection to the area and up until this article, the Branch Davidians and those residing around the Mount Carmel area had coexisted

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<sup>22</sup> Mark England. “The Sinful Messiah,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, February 27, 1993

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Mark England, “The Sinful Messiah,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, February 27, 1993

<sup>25</sup> Ibid



peacefully for decades. They had never given Waco residents a reason to question their actions. The first responses to these articles were only sent following the ATF raid, when the first part of the “Sinful Messiah” series was republished.

On February 28, the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms went to the Branch Davidian compound. They arrived with a search warrant for federal firearms and explosives violations.<sup>26</sup> The Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the events explained that they had “fully automatic machine guns and destructive devices” in a storage location that the Davidians called “The Mag Bag.”<sup>27</sup> The ATF also heard David Koresh “had sex with underage girls and whipped infants.”<sup>28</sup> The ATF had arrived at 9:30am, and as soon as they arrived, they “came under immediate gunfire.”<sup>29</sup> During the raid, four ATF agents were killed and negotiators were sent in to talk to the people in the compound. Waco residents, however, felt that there had been a leak, and that the Waco Tribune Herald’s publication of the “Sinful Messiah” series was the start of that leak. While some appeared to be in support of the government, others questioned the ATF and questioned whether or not what they did was right.

When the ATF raid occurred, many Waco residents were surprised. Resident Bob Murphy explained that he “thought the annual fights at the state Baptist Convention were about as racy as Waco got,” and proceeded to poke fun at the city’s religious influence by saying “it’s good to know they can come up with some real Las

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<sup>26</sup> “ATF Raid,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 1, 1993

<sup>27</sup> Department of Justice, *Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco Texas, February 28<sup>th</sup> to April 19<sup>th</sup> 1993*, by Richard Scruggs, Redacted Version

<sup>28</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 1, 1993

<sup>29</sup> Department of Justice, *Report to the Deputy Attorney General on the Events at Waco Texas, February 28<sup>th</sup> to April 19<sup>th</sup> 1993*, by Richard Scruggs, Redacted Version

Vegas sin now and then.”<sup>30</sup> Mayor Bob Sheehy said, “we do have a nice city. It’s hard to believe this has occurred right outside your town,” when asked for his opinion on the raid.<sup>31</sup>

Waco residents were not only surprised by the occurrence, they were also surprised to see something happen to such an isolationist group. One resident likened them to “Tennessee hillbillies who just wanted to be left alone.”<sup>32</sup> Billy Atkinson, a Waco resident, said the ATF’s attacks were “a big fuss over nothing,” and that “these people have been here a long time and don’t bother nobody [sic].”<sup>33</sup> Another resident said, “if people want to live in a commune I see no reason why they cannot do it.”<sup>34</sup> Many locals felt that the Branch Davidians were not threatening, one resident described them as a “seclusive [sic] order composed of peaceful working people who were harming no one and had no intention of doing so.”<sup>35</sup> Though the Davidians had mostly kept to themselves, especially in regard to their religious views, people were still free to enter and exit the compound prior to the standoff. Many people knew the Davidians and their children. The Superintendent of the Axtell Independent School District commented that his “dealings with [the Davidians] had always been normal.” In regard to the children he described them as “good kids” but that they were “not the type that hung out at other children’s homes or invited them over after school.”<sup>36</sup> The parents and the children appeared to be normal and non-threatening, which was what caught Waco residents off guard. For

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<sup>30</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 3, 1993

<sup>31</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 1, 1993

<sup>32</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 7, 1993

<sup>33</sup> Mike Cochran. Religious Controversy Nothing New to Waco, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 7, 1993

<sup>34</sup> “Leave them Alone,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 3, 1993

<sup>35</sup> Drew Parma. ATF Says Call May Have Sent Raid Plan Awry. *Waco Tribune Herald*. March 16, 1993

<sup>36</sup> Mike Cochran. Religious Controversy Nothing New to Waco, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 7, 1993

many Waco residents, prior to the ATF raid, such an event was unheard of, which was why such a range of emotions came about following the ATF raid.

Those within and those outside Waco began to contemplate why the Branch Davidians were able to live this way for so long. Ira Iscoe, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin, commented in a Waco Tribune Herald article that “maybe since it is a religious town, they’re better at tolerating it: ‘they believe in their religion, leave them alone, they’re not bothering us.’”<sup>37</sup> He also explained “Waco’s going to have a...lot of resentment [toward] ATF people for embarrassing them, putting Waco up there, saying, “Near Waco, there’s a cult.”<sup>38</sup> It was evident that even those living outside of Waco understood the kind of town Waco was, and understood that many Waco residents would not welcome the intrusion.

Shortly after the ATF raid, the Waco Tribune Herald published articles centered on gun control and the militant nature of the Branch Davidians. Some of the editorials that came about talked about shooting down the law that lets Texans carry concealed handguns, another one talked about making the regulations to become an “ATF-licensed gun dealer” more stringent or providing background checks on those who were buying guns.<sup>39</sup> Many of the Waco Tribune Herald’s articles labeled David Koresh as a “gun-toting leader,” and focused on his gun ownership more than any of the other accusations against him, including that of child abuse.<sup>40</sup> Kathryn Schroeder, one of the Branch Davidian “leaders,” was described as being in possession of an “AR-15 type rifle,” and as wearing “military or

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Editorial, March 4, 1993

<sup>40</sup> Drew Parma, Witness Labels Cultist Gun-Toting Leader, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 30, 1993

commando style clothing.” One editorial stated, “Something’s wrong when civilians can outgun law enforcement.”<sup>41</sup> Waco residents, however, did not agree with the Waco Tribune Herald’s editor, and rather than becoming sympathetic for the federal government, these gun control articles and editorials resulted in a backlash against them. Residents were frustrated because they felt that the Waco Tribune Herald was blaming the NRA and guns instead of blaming David Koresh for the actions of the Branch Davidians. Some residents feared bigger government as a result of this and one asked, “which civil liberty are you going to attack next—freedom of religion, freedom of press, freedom of assembly?”<sup>42</sup> The possibility of greater gun laws even led to 12 people to sign a letter to the Waco Tribune Herald asking them to “not distort the facts about guns, existing gun laws, and your fellow citizens who disagree with you.”<sup>43</sup>

Rowland Nethaway, an editor for the Waco Tribune Herald wrote that he received many letters after writing his editorial and was surprised that most of the residents that wrote to the newspaper agreed with the Branch Davidian cult members. He said, “The gist of the message by the cult defenders was that the government shouldn’t be coming onto a man’s private property and try to take away his guns.”<sup>44</sup> While Nethaway may have not agreed with the statements, this was the prevailing sentiment among Waco residents.

Letters immediately following the raid reflect increasing suspicion toward the ATF and their reasons for invading the compound. They found inconsistencies in

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<sup>41</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Editorial, March 2, 1993

<sup>42</sup> “Civil Liberties,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 27, 1993

<sup>43</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 17, 1993

<sup>44</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*. Editorial, March 6, 1993

the stories that law enforcement had told. Law enforcement had said that “Vernon Howell had not left his heavily fortified compound “in months,” but residents and business owners said that they had seen him in the past two months.<sup>45</sup> Margaret Jones, one of the local residents, said that she saw Vernon Howell, or David Koresh, about four months ago in a Waco store. She said, “I know that Jesus with a 9mm is not particularly enticing, but I don’t like to see the federal agents lying about the situation either...he is always out everywhere, everybody and their dog see him.”<sup>46</sup> She argued that the federal agents were “just trying to cover themselves because they are going to be in big trouble—hopefully.”<sup>47</sup>

While some Waco residents were upset by the inconsistencies in the stories that law enforcement told them, many Waco residents were also very supportive of the ATF and the actions they took during the raid. One resident wrote in about a couple, Erbie and Betty Necessary, who “traveled back and forth collecting donations from supermarkets, restaurants and businesses,” and then delivering the donations to the police, firefighters and journalists camped out near the compound.<sup>48</sup> Local businesses donated free cellular phones, free food, and pastors were available to “comfort the injured,” the Baptist Medical Center also provided food, phones and lodging.<sup>49</sup> The Waco Tribune Herald also explains that the support was not only from within Waco, it extended to Killeen, Lampasas and College

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<sup>45</sup> Marc Masferrer and Tommy Witherspoon, Residents, businesses say Howell not a recluse, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 4, 1993

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 4, 1993

<sup>49</sup> Mike Cochran, Tragedy Nearby Stuns Citizens, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 2, 1993

Station, neighboring towns to Waco eager to help out the cause.<sup>50</sup> All of these offers indicate a great amount of support for the ATF. Residents also felt that the media was inhibiting the ATF from doing their jobs. One resident suspected that the “presence of the media alerted Howell to the probability of ATF’s imminent arrival.”<sup>51</sup> Another resident said the media was just “getting in the way of the FBI and ATF while they are trying to settle the hostage situation...when the FBI or ATF wants to tell the media what’s going on, that is when they should start their reports to tell to the public.”<sup>52</sup> Several residents described the Waco Tribune Herald’s publication of the “Sinful Messiah” series as “arrogant,” and also thought it had a “direct impact on the deaths of the ATF men.”<sup>53</sup> Though the FBI’s investigation indicated that it was an anonymous tipster that informed the Branch Davidians about the ATF raid, the allegation that the publication of the Sinful Messiah series played a role in the Branch Davidians’ hostile response on February 28 would continue to be discussed in letters throughout and following the shooting. Though opinions throughout the standoff were polarized, for a short time there were residents that felt disconnected from the raid and did not feel it affected them. One resident explained, “it won’t affect our lives unless we let it.”<sup>54</sup>

As time went by, however, Waco residents began to feel more connected with the standoff, especially because of the media coverage that often associated the standoff with the city of Waco. It went from being described as the compound near

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<sup>50</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 16, 1993

<sup>51</sup> “Media Alerted Howell,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 5, 1993

<sup>52</sup> “Media is in the Way,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 16, 1993

<sup>53</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 6, 1993

<sup>54</sup> Bechetta Jackson, Life in City Goes on Despite Siege, *Waco Tribune Herald*. March 7, 1993

Waco to being described as the “Waco siege,” among other names. Many of the residents grew tired of the intrusion of the media and the establishment of “Satellite City” right near the compound.<sup>55</sup> Though many restaurants and hotels reported a boom in business, people grew tired of the “traffic, noise and danger.”<sup>56</sup> One resident commented that “the Pizza Hut man can get in easier than [he] can” because it was difficult, if they lived near the compound, to go back to their homes when officers are on duty that have not worked there before.<sup>57</sup> Often if they weren’t recognized they would be questioned prior to entering the area surrounding the compound. Resident Debra Kubitz said she was “ready for [her] life to go back to being dull and boring.”<sup>58</sup> She was one of many residents that complained that the quality of life had decreased in Waco since the beginning of the standoff. A farmer living in the Mount Carmel area explained that, “we had a quiet community. Now we have helicopters hovering over our land and break-ins.”<sup>59</sup> Residents also complained that they were not even getting their mail delivered or garbage collected during the standoff.

As Waco residents and those who lived close to Mount Carmel grew frustrated with the standoff, opinions and views of the Branch Davidian conflict remained just as polarized as they had been just after the ATF raid, and many residents had different concerns about how the government and media were handling the situation.

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<sup>55</sup> George Church. “The Branch Davidians: The End is Near.” *Time Magazine*. (April 26, 1993)

<sup>56</sup> Associated Press, Neighbors Put Lives on hold, wait for normalcy to return, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 20, 1993

<sup>57</sup> Adams, Samuel, Life Drags on for Residents, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 30, 1993

<sup>58</sup> Associated Press, Neighbors Put Lives on hold, wait for normalcy to return, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 20, 1993

<sup>59</sup> Adams, Samuel, Life Drags on for Residents, *Waco Tribune Herald*, March 30, 1993

One of the biggest complaints from the residents during the standoff was the amount of media coverage that the standoff received. One resident wrote in an editorial that he “was wondering, if the feds hadn’t done what they did February 28<sup>th</sup>, what [the news would] be today?”<sup>60</sup> Another resident commented that “sensationalizing the news does not have to be the Tribune Herald’s style” and that everything that the Waco Tribune Herald had been writing about the Branch Davidians who “a lot of people do not really care about” could have been “better spent on local investigative reporting.”<sup>61</sup> From when the standoff started on February 28<sup>th</sup> to the fire, there were only five days that did not dedicate at least part of the front page of the Waco Tribune Herald to the standoff. From the beginning of the ATF raid up until the fire, some residents still felt that the Waco Tribune Herald and the media were at least partially to blame for the Branch Davidians knowledge of the ATF raid. One resident described the media as “a bunch of totally irresponsible ghouls who feed upon events.”<sup>62</sup>

Residents who supported the ATF felt like their opinion was not being represented through the Waco Tribune Herald and described the newspaper as having a “pro-Davidian, anti-government stance.”<sup>63</sup> Those who supported the ATF were not the only ones who felt as though their opinions were not represented in the Waco Tribune Herald. Those who were against the ATF also felt disappointed. Residents felt that the media exaggerated the story so that they could get a good story out of it. One resident said, “if officials claim cult members were a “threat” then

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<sup>60</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 26

<sup>61</sup> “Sensationalizing the News,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 25, 1993

<sup>62</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*. Letter to the Editor, March 21, 1993

<sup>63</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*. Letter to the Editor, March 25, 1993



why were they not arrested right then and there at the sheriff's department when they had previously visited?"<sup>64</sup> Though the Waco Tribune Herald had articles that both supported and opposed the ATF and the FBI's actions in the standoff, it was evident that residents felt that the newspaper did not go far enough in conveying the strong, polarized opinions that most residents of Waco felt.

There were several new perspectives that emerged in the weeks following the raid. As Waco became more associated with the standoff, residents became more vocal. One resident explained that, "there is a gap between the reality of Waco and the image that the national media have created."<sup>65</sup> They felt like they were being associated with people that did not even live in their area. One resident commented that David Koresh's ideas actually did not even originate in Waco, and that the media should, instead, be focusing its time on California.

Waco citizens took offense at the idea that it was a common misconception that Koresh's ideas originated in their city. Many disapproved of Koresh's beliefs and also disapproved of the choices he made. Some Waco residents believed that David Koresh may have not believed everything that he was preaching to his followers. One resident described Koresh's decision to "replenish the earth with his seed" as a "fabrication to fulfill his own lustful desires."<sup>66</sup> Others felt that Koresh was misinterpreting the bible and used scriptural justification to explain why they felt this way. One resident commented that Jesus Christ said "a tree is known by its fruit and there was obviously a lot of bad fruit being lived out in this whole situation at

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Editorial, March 19, 1993

<sup>66</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, May 13, 1993

Mount Carmel.”<sup>67</sup> Other residents made scriptural references in their letters. Though many disagreed with David Koresh’s actions, the intrusion of government into this secluded compound prompted many Waco residents to worry, with some questioning whether this was really an issue of safety for the abused children or if it was a bigger issue involving religious freedom.

Many Waco residents were upset by the articles that the Waco Tribune Herald published that had opinions in favor of gun control, and the Waco Tribune Herald seemed to sense this and gradually switched their area of emphasis. Their articles shifted from emphasizing gun control to sympathy for the children in the compound. The Waco Tribune Herald wrote many articles on former Branch Davidian, Kiri Jewell. When Kiri Jewell was 11, she was selected to be a member of the “House of David,” or David Koresh’s “personal harem.”<sup>68</sup> The article explains that when Kiri’s father, David Jewell, tried to obtain custody of her and make child abuse claims, officials were not helpful. As the coverage continued about Kiri Jewell and other children that were being abused in the compound, many of the residents responded to this with skepticism toward local officials and the Branch Davidians. Some residents felt that their own local officials had not acted fast enough and thanked the ATF for their actions, one resident explained that many individuals including Marc Breault and “other former Davidians came to our local constabularies to warn and plead with them to diffuse the volatile situation at Mount Carmel. Yet our local officials did nothing.”<sup>69</sup> Others worried about the

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<sup>67</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, May 12, 1993

<sup>68</sup> Marc England, *The Sinful Messiah*, Waco Tribune Herald. February 27, 1993

<sup>69</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 20, 1993

children and stood behind the ATF, arguing that David Koresh had “given up his rights” the moment he started abusing children.<sup>70</sup>

Residents also began to feel more sympathy toward the FBI and ATF. Some felt that the media was making it difficult for the ATF and FBI to do their jobs. One resident explained that the “media [is] doing just what Vernon Howell wants them to do.”<sup>71</sup> The resident thought that David Koresh was seeking attention, and that in writing about Koresh, they were playing into his hands and making it difficult for officials to do their job. One resident explained that the ATF “tried to serve the warrant when the door was slammed in agents’ faces and the gunfire started coming from within the house.”<sup>72</sup> Many residents questioned the motivation of the media in their publishing of this coverage; they felt like they were not being told the whole story. Many also still resented the Waco Tribune Herald for tipping the Branch Davidians off about the ATF raid. One resident summarized it best when they wrote, “all they care about is glamorization and making the almighty dollar. They have no respect for human life.”<sup>73</sup>

Some Waco residents feared that this was going to be a domino effect, and that the Branch Davidians would be the first of many “cults” that the government would try to crack down on. Rowland Nethaway, an editor for the Waco Tribune Herald commented that, “nearly all religions were once cults” including Christian Scientists, Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists, and “if a cult survives long

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<sup>70</sup> “Before the raid,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 23, 1993

<sup>71</sup> “Media supports Howell,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 27, 1993

<sup>72</sup> “ATF served warrant,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 27, 1993

<sup>73</sup> “No respect for human life,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 27, 1993

enough” it will become accepted as a mainstream religion.<sup>74</sup> The fear residents had was that if a religion had some abnormal practices, the government would also try to intrude on them.<sup>75</sup> Some felt that the main reason that they were even targeted was because of their controversial religious beliefs. One resident argued that he could have easily been arrested outside of the compound, and he argued that the reason why the raid was orchestrated was to “fill us with fear and condition us to support more get-tough tax dollars as well as a new round of restrictive laws and ordinances.”<sup>76</sup>

Within the last two weeks of the standoff there was disproportionately more pro-ATF sentiment. This was largely due to the shift in the Waco Tribune Herald’s area of emphasis, but was also due to comments that were made about Waco. Though Waco had become increasingly more connected with Mount Carmel and the standoff after the ATF raid, Waco residents were most upset when a journalist from London came to Waco and said that, “Waco is a grungy, one-horse town where the horse has died.”<sup>77</sup> This one comment alone led to days of letters to the editor explaining to the London journalist that he had not seen the best of Waco and that it was wrong to make a judgment about Waco based on his experience at Mount Carmel. When Waco residents realized that they were also under scrutiny, along with the FBI and ATF, the amount of letters against the FBI and ATF decreased. Waco residents at least wanted to appear more united because it was their city that was being criticized.

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<sup>74</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 24, 1993

<sup>75</sup> “Bigger Government,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, March 24, 1993

<sup>76</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*. Letter to the Editor, March 4, 1993

<sup>77</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*. Letter to the Editor, March 28, 1993

This was especially shown after the fire on April 19, 1993. It was then that people became overwhelmingly in support of the government's actions. Judging by the community's opposition to the intrusion of the ATF, it could not have simply been a quick change of opinion. With 88.9% of residents saying that they had read a lot about the standoff at Mount Carmel, it's unlikely that their opinion would have changed that drastically when they had been getting the day-to-day coverage.<sup>78</sup> Their motivation, however, for expressing support for the ATF and FBI may have been because outsiders had become increasingly more critical of the actions of the ATF, FBI and local officials following the fire.

The New York Times said that "The Koresh affair has been mishandled from beginning to end...the hard lesson is that patience and determination do not cost lives, but impatience does."<sup>79</sup> This was the perspective that many of the outsiders held. They felt that the government had become impatient and as a result, their impatience led to the loss of human lives. The St. Paul Pioneer Press asked "was this assault, as the FBI said, the best hope to avert what it believed was the possibility of mass suicide?"<sup>80</sup> Many questioned the FBI's actions and some even offered suggestions. The Hartford Courant said that they "should have removed the barbed wire, the military hardware and the loudspeakers. They should have stayed away from the compound and waited. Sooner or later Mr. Koresh and his followers would have come out."<sup>81</sup> The Boston Globe argued that, "with their lives at stake, there was

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<sup>78</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*. Results surprise one poll director, April 22, 1993

<sup>79</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion, *New York Times*, April 25, 1993

<sup>80</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion, *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 25, 1993

<sup>81</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion, *Hartford Courant*, April 25, 1993

no reason for the government to be impatient.”<sup>82</sup> The Sacramento Bee argued that the agents acted as if “those who were inside were enemies who had to be subdued rather than hostages who had to be protected and rescued.”<sup>83</sup>

Newspapers outside of Waco, instead of criticizing the Branch Davidians for their beliefs and calling them a cult, instead described them as victims of a federal government that had gone too far. The Nashville Tennessean explained that the “tactics and timing of the FBI will now be thoroughly questioned,” and that they will “continue to be asked why they chose to go in after Koresh, knowing that innocent lives were at stake.”<sup>84</sup> Though many newspapers appeared to disapprove of the FBI and ATF’s role in the Branch Davidian standoff, a poll taken by the Los Angeles times still indicated that some still had favorable opinions of both organizations. When polled, 40 percent of Americans thought that the criticism of the FBI’s role went too far.<sup>85</sup>

There were a few newspapers from outside Waco that seemed to echo the views of Waco residents following the fire. Tulsa World argued that, “some people will probably blame ‘society’ for letting this happen, the government for not handling it differently, and surely the media, but the real villains here are the ones who did the deed.”<sup>86</sup> Some newspapers understood that the standoff “could not go on forever” and the Pittsburg Post-Gazette explained that, “David Koresh was given every opportunity to avoid that outcome.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion, *Boston Globe*, April 25, 1993

<sup>83</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion, *Sacramento Bee*, April 25, 1993

<sup>84</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion, *Nashville Tennessean*, April 25, 1993

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Rosenstien, Poll Says Coverage on Cult Excessive, *Los Angeles Times* May 10, 1993

<sup>86</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion. *Tulsa World*. April 25, 1993

<sup>87</sup> Associated Press, A Wave of National Opinion. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. April 25, 1993

After the fire, many Waco residents thought that the government did the best they could under the circumstances. Many residents placed the blame on either David Koresh or the Branch Davidians themselves and they were most sympathetic regarding the deaths of the children. One resident explained that when the residents gave their lives to David Koresh and “surrendered responsibility for their own thinking,” it brought about the “sacrifice of their own children for their own egotistical need to be right.”<sup>88</sup> Though many sympathized with the children, most Waco residents accepted the view that even though it would have been better to have saved the children, there was nothing that could have been done. One resident wrote, “we all felt a deep sadness for the children...but no one could change the mind of David Koresh.”<sup>89</sup> They felt that David Koresh had already brainwashed the children and parents to the point where nothing could have been done because they did essentially anything that David Koresh ordered them to do.

One resident wrote, “it’s a sick world when law breakers are praised and the law enforcement lambasted.”<sup>90</sup> It appeared as though many of the Waco residents felt that the FBI and ATF were being unfairly blamed for the actions that happened the day of the fire. One resident asked if “some people really know what has been happening or if they “just enjoy cop bashing.” One resident did not think that “things could have been handled much differently” and that the ATF and the FBI “didn’t deserve nine tenths of the criticism that has been administered [to them].”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, May 6, 1993

<sup>89</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, April 28, 1993

<sup>90</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, May 24, 1993

<sup>91</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, April 21, 1993

Though many residents supported the FBI and ATF following the fire, there were still some that were skeptical. One resident felt that the government seems to “feel a lot less restrained when dealing with matters “religious.”<sup>92</sup> Some of the residents felt that it was simply the government trying to assert their power in the situation. One resident commented that “Big Brother is alive and well in 1993.”<sup>93</sup> A writer for the Waco Tribune Herald argued that this was an assault on Christian America, and that “other groups labeled fanatical or inconvenient have been ridiculed then persecuted when public feelings replaced justice morality and truth as our national standards.”<sup>94</sup> He likened the Branch Davidian standoff to the Japanese Internment camps during World War II, arguing that they were also “labeled, devalued and persecuted, all in quick succession.”<sup>95</sup> One resident also made this comparison, writing, “on the day we as a nation were commemorating the Jewish Holocaust, Mount Carmel burned down. By that time the public had gotten used to the idea that the Davidians were bad people and they had got what they deserved.”<sup>96</sup> There were many skeptics, some within Waco, others outside that had varying views and motivations for why either the Branch Davidians or the government caused the fire. This has led to the Branch Davidian conflict, especially the causes of the fire becoming a constantly debated issue.

Since the fire and even into today, the Branch Davidian conflict still remains the object of conspiracy theories. One of the Branch Davidian survivors, David

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<sup>92</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, April 22, 1993

<sup>93</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, May 18, 1993

<sup>94</sup> *Waco Tribune Herald*, Editorial, May 20, 1993

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>96</sup> “They got what they deserved,” *Waco Tribune Herald*, Letter to the Editor, April 22, 1993



Thibodeau, denied the accounts that officials were giving of a mass suicide. He said, “military vehicles pushed in the front door Monday, making it impossible to exit.”<sup>97</sup> In a later interview to Reason Magazine, Thibodeau explained that prior to the tear gas, David Koresh said, “They’re coming and they’re on their way. Don’t anybody do anything stupid. We want to talk to them; we want to work it out.”<sup>98</sup> Thibodeau continues to explain that when the ATF confronted Koresh before putting the tear gas in, he asked to “just talk about this” and “work this out.”<sup>99</sup> He argued that instead of the Branch Davidians firing first, it was actually the ATF that fired first and that the ATF did not intend for any survivors to come out of this conflict alive. Thibodeau also said that the FBI “benefited greatly for the building burning to the ground,” because it left them with no evidence, so this could have been a motive for why the whole compound was set on fire.<sup>100</sup> The idea that the government was the one that set the fire and not the Branch Davidians is the prevailing conspiracy theory of today. Though it has been over seventeen years since the conflict, it is evident that many people will still think of the Branch Davidian conflict as a moment when the government may have gone too far and infringed upon the rights of some of their own citizens.

Prior to the Branch Davidian conflict, Waco was a little-known religious city and home to Baylor University, but at the conflict’s height, it was the center of news for media around the world. Dozens of reporters camped outside Satellite City in the hopes of catching a glimpse of Koresh and receiving the latest news on the Branch

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<sup>97</sup> Darlene McCormick, Cultists dispute official accounts of Mass Suicide, April 25, 1993

<sup>98</sup> Michael W. Lynch., What happened at Waco, *Reason*, October 4, 1999

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 4

Davidian conflict. At the start of the raid, resident opinions were polarized due to the Waco Tribune Herald's discussion of gun control, but by the time the fire had occurred, many Waco residents agreed with what the FBI and ATF had done. Those who were residents in the Mount Carmel area grew tired of being associated with the Branch Davidians and Mount Carmel. Most argued what is now described as the "Waco siege" was not a Waco siege at all. It was a siege in an area that they had no connection to until the standoff. While many residents were incredibly skeptical of the government and its actions, when they realized Waco itself was under scrutiny by the media, they found it to be more advantageous to present a united front to the press. Though many people may have disagreed with the conflict internally, to them it was more important to keep up the united image of Waco than to continue to express their grievances in the form of letters to the editor. Though Waco's image for the most part has been rehabilitated, it is probable that the Branch Davidian conflict will never be forgotten.

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