

REMEMBER WACO!
THE DISASTER IN POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE

PHILIP JENKINS
BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

<https://www.baylor.edu/history/index.php?id=87862>

Paper presented to the conference on
[Reflecting on an American Tragedy](#)
Institute for Studies of Religion
Baylor University
April 2013

REMEMBER WACO!
THE DISASTER IN POLITICS AND POPULAR CULTURE

In 1995, I used the then-recent Waco incident and the ensuing attack in Oklahoma City as the conclusion of a one volume *History of the United States* that I was then writing. Together, these events summarized so many of the themes that I had presented throughout the book, in matters of American political ideologies and attitudes to violence, no less than in religious matters strictly defined. At the time, though, one of the manuscript reviewers complained that these events deserved nothing like this serious attention, as they so evidently belonged to the lunatic fringe. Obviously, I disagreed with that stance, and subsequent developments bear me out. As I will argue, Waco and its aftermath did much to shape the history of the 1990s, and religion was only one of the areas affected.

The Waco siege would not necessarily have been so significant if it had not occurred in the political and cultural circumstances that it did, when it came to epitomize so many ongoing debates. Of course, Waco forced religious believers to explore the consequences of apocalyptic thought, but it also contributed to popular discourse over violence and guns; about trust in government and popular sovereignty; about religious persecution; and about issues of gender and masculinity. Directly and indirectly, it generated a flood of books, articles, news stories, and segments on television shows, making it an unavoidable part of public discourse. Waco became a vital battle in the nation's newly declared Culture War.

It is though in the realm of terrorism that Waco had its greatest impact. For multiple reasons, the affair stirred Right-wing militancy, while disabling official sanctions that might have reduced its growth. The consequence was a striking growth of far Right movements, which in turn stirred Left and liberal opposition. Both opposing views found expression in the popular culture of the era. The resulting furor radically distorted US terrorism policy for several years, and arguably made the rise of Islamist terror much more likely. A direct road does run from Waco to 9/11.

The Evil Messiah

Popular culture treatments often capture historical events to the extent that the book or film dominates public memory at least as much as the real phenomena – I think of Watergate and the film of *All the Presidents' Men*. Neither Waco nor Oklahoma City produced any such memorial, and the available products - films, fiction, true crime accounts - are either of specialized interest, or are instantly forgettable ephemera.¹ (I obviously draw a distinction here with the many worthwhile scholarly studies that have appeared).²

¹ Although the Waco incident drew the attention of some significant mainstream writers, none of their works have had a lasting impact. See for instance Dean Koontz, *Dark Rivers of the Heart* (New York: Knopf, 1994) and John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996). For a useful discussion of popular culture treatments, see Carl Hoover, "The Branch Davidian Siege's Influence on Popular Culture," March 24, 2003, at <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/2812/the-branch-davidian-sieges-influence-on-popular-culture>

² James R. Lewis, ed., *From the Ashes* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1994);

Early visual imagery, though, wholly supported the federal government's view of Waco as an outbreak of religious lunacy, with cult stereotypes to the foreground. *Time* offered a double image of Koresh ("whose heavily armed sect gunned down federal agents") alongside Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the leader of the first World Trade Center attack, which had occurred two days before. Both men showed what went wrong "when believers embrace the dark side of faith." These themes were reinforced two weeks later, when anti-abortion activist Michael Griffin murdered Dr. David Gunn in Pensacola, Florida. In its various forms, it seemed, religious fanaticism was rampant in the US.³

More potent visuals followed after the fire. *Time's* now-notorious cover headlined "Tragedy in Waco." A laughing David Koresh was superimposed on the burning compound, with the Biblical caption "His name was Death, and Hell followed with him." *People Weekly*, another mass circulation outlet, reported from "Inside the Waco Cult," with its "Evil Messiah," a pedophile who led his fanatical disciples to tragedy. Cartoons depicted Koresh alongside Sheikh Omar, and (inevitably) with a ghostly Jim Jones, who offers David a Kool-Aid. Michael Griffin also made his appearance.

Similar motifs dominated early true crime reporting of the incident. Among the early books were accounts of *The Shocking Story of Cult Leader David Koresh and the Branch Davidians*; of *Blind Devotion and Bloodshed in David Koresh's Holy War*, or more succinctly, of the *Mad Man in Waco*. The FBI's view of Koresh-as-Antichrist was reflected in NBC's television movie *In the Line of Duty: Ambush at Waco*.⁴

The cult theme was inescapable. All that was debatable was whether Koresh personally was a rogue or a lunatic.⁵ In the words of one Bureau negotiator, "There had been some question, "Are we dealing with a delusional personality or are we dealing with a con man? Does this guy think he's Jesus Christ or is he just a con man who's using religion to deceive all the rest

Dick J. Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); David Thibodeau, *A Place Called Waco* (New York: PublicAffairs, 1999); Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ For anti-abortion violence, see Philip Jenkins, "Fighting Terrorism as if Women Mattered," in Jeff Ferrell and Neil Websdale, eds, *Making Trouble* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999), 319-346.

⁴ Clifford Linedecker, *Massacre at Waco, Texas: The Shocking Story of Cult Leader David Koresh and the Branch Davidians* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993); Tim Madigan, *See No Evil: Blind Devotion and Bloodshed in David Koresh's Holy War* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Summit Group, 1993); Bob Darden and Brad Bailey, *Mad Man in Waco* (Waco, Tex.: WRS Pub., 1993) Marc Breault and Martin King, *Inside the Cult* (New York: Signet, 1993).

⁵ Sam Howe Verhovek, "Messiah Fond of Rock, Women and Bible," *New York Times*, March 3, 1993.

of the people inside?" How could any "cult leader" be treated as honest or sincere, especially one who "claimed to be Christ?"⁶

Yet the case, obviously, was not closed. Waco became the subject of fierce debate between two irreconcilable points of view. For liberals and the Left, Waco demonstrated everything that was wrong with "extreme" religion – its fanaticism and sexual hypocrisy, leading inevitably to violence and sexual exploitation. This discourse had special power in the early 1990s in the aftermath of the repeated successes of the Moral Majority during the Reagan era. Those triumphs had come to a crashing halt with the televangelist scandals of 1987, making evangelicals and fundamentalists fair game for media attacks in a way that they would not have been a few years earlier. Contextualizing an apparent "Religious Rightist" with the self-evident evils of Islamic terrorism was rhetorically valuable: fanatics were fanatics, and deserved no part in mainstream US political life.

Culture Wars

Another competing view was of course possible, namely that the violence resulted from the brutal excesses of an out-of-control federal government engaged in a systematic assault on the lives and religious liberties of free citizens. From this standpoint, the Davidians were a persecuted church rather than a cult, and Waco was the scene of a massacre, not a suicide. This view gained such traction that by the end of the decade, over 60 percent of respondents believed that federal forces themselves had started the deadly fires of April 19. That sea-change is all the more remarkable given the near-unanimity of support for the official view in the first few weeks.

In order to understand the power of this interpretation, it is helpful to recall the cultural politics of the time, just a few weeks after Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration. During the previous year, a recession had severely undermined the position of President George H Bush, while the impressive third party candidacy of Ross Perot focused on issues of free trade and deficits. Yet for all the economic concerns, cultural and religious matters were very much to the forefront of the 1992 campaign. Bush faced a severe challenge from Patrick Buchanan, whose speech at the Republican national convention galvanized social conservatives. Buchanan warned that:

There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.

The phrase "culture war" epitomized widespread concerns about morality issues such as abortion and homosexuality, easy access to pornography, and the exclusion of religion from public life. (The actual term *Culture Wars* was popularized by James Davison Hunter in his

⁶ The FBI opinions are drawn from interviews broadcast on "Waco: The Inside Story," PBS's *Frontline* special, October 17, 1995. Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

1991 book of that name).⁷ Underlying these concerns was the sense that the federal courts had gravely exceeded their proper constitutional role, by imposing social and sexual liberalism upon a reluctant nation. To quote Buchanan again,

The agenda Clinton and Clinton would impose on America — abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat — that's change, all right. But it is not the kind of change America wants. It is not the kind of change America needs. And it is not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God's country.

Quite apart from regular party politics, the United States was in these years undergoing a shift in gender attitudes that in many ways was quite as radical as the late 1960s, and which in fact represented a culmination of that earlier era. Between 1989 and 1994, the nation was in the throes of full-scale Gender Wars, in the sense of a systematic cultural assault on the evils supposedly resulting from traditional male authority and its associated violence against women and children. Radical gender politics – feminist and gay – achieved a mainstream status that they had never occupied before, and arguably never have since. Patriarchal institutions – courts, legislatures, churches, armed forces – found themselves assailed as never before, and those battles echoed through popular culture.

I will not describe those campaigns here, since they really demand book-length coverage, but the year 1991 alone marked the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in the US Senate, with the attendant focus on sexual harassment; the Tailhook harassment scandal; and the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith. We think also of the discovery of stalking in 1989-90, and the debates over ritual child abuse, and recovered memories of child abuse. Between 1992 and 1994, charges of sexual abuse against Roman Catholic clergy became commonplace, giving rise to talk of an abuse “epidemic.” An insurrection against gender oppression manifested itself in attacks on anti-gay attitudes and violence, as manifested by violent ACT-UP demonstrations against the Roman Catholic Church. In other churches, radical separatist feminism was expressed in events such as the ReImaginations conference, which detonated political conflicts that would shake Protestant denominations through the decade. All these trends were abundantly reflected in film, thrillers, TV series, and popular culture.

Meanwhile, the media reported enthusiastically on feminist vigilantism against abusers and molesters. Celebrated cases of the era included Lorena Bobbitt, Ellie Nesler (who murdered the alleged molester of her child); and lesbian serial killer Aileen Wuornos. Each such case, and many lesser known, attracted much public sympathy, including some open defenses of their violence. (I think of all the *Thelma and Louise* related cartoons and bumper stickers from this time).

Legitimately or otherwise, feminist activism found a prominent face in 1992-93 in Hillary Clinton, and in the new Democratic Attorney-General Janet Reno. Bill Clinton's electoral success was made possible only by his huge advantage among women voters. In the climate

⁷ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic, 1991); William C. Martin, *With God On Our Side* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996).

of the time, liberals at least found convincing the Justice Department's stance that the Waco raids had been forced by allegations of child abuse and sexual exploitation at Mount Carmel.⁸

Republican Revolution

But the Democratic victory in 1992 masked serious underlying weaknesses, and all but invited a conservative reaction focused on such traditionally male issues as gun ownership. Although Clinton won in 1992, his share of the popular vote was only a little better than Walter Mondale's during 1984, and actually fell short of what Michael Dukakis had achieved in 1988. Without Perot siphoning off 19 percent of voters nationwide, Clinton could never have beaten the incumbent President Bush. Conservatives regrouped over the next two years, particularly targeting the administration's liberal and feminist tendencies. Leading issues included the maternalism of the administration's health care plans, its attempt to remove restrictions from gay service in the military, and its support for a greater military role for women.

The 1994 Congressional elections were catastrophic for Democrats, who lost the House for the first time since 1954, and saw their position in the Senate slip even further. 1994 has in fact been described as Ronald Reagan's third election victory. Over the next two years, conservatives positioned themselves for still greater advances, culminating in Buchanan's 1996 presidential bid.⁹

In these controversies, Waco served a potent symbolic role among those grassroots organizations that now became so crucial to Republican success. From 1993, that conservative base included the extremely important media component of talk radio, widely credited for contributing to the victories of hardline Congressional conservatives. Waco galvanized an increasingly aggressive National Rifle Association: in 1995, the NRA's Wayne LaPierre spoke of federal agents as "jackbooted government thugs." Apart from the gun theme, Janet Reno's role in the Justice Department reinforced the gender element of the perceived threat to civil liberties and the familiar social order.

Waco now became the focus of a movement to expose and disprove official accounts of the siege. One leading activist was Linda Thompson, who created the widely distributed videotape *Waco: The Big Lie*, with its various successors. In 1995, Richard Mosley followed with his *Day 51: The True Story of Waco*. Far more credible than either, and more influential, was the 1997 *Waco: Rules of Engagement*, which eschewed wider conspiracy claims and addressed itself strictly to the circumstances of the siege and fire.¹⁰ By mid-decade, the Waco issue had merged with other conspiracy themes, including the charge that the Clintons had

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994); Philip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁹ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Carol Moore, *Davidian Massacre* (Franklin, Tenn.: Legacy Communications, 1995); David B. Kopel and Paul H. Blackman, *No More Wacos* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1997); James Bovard, *"Feeling Your Pain"* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000)

murdered White House aide Vincent Foster, whose July 1993 death was recorded as suicide.¹¹

Militias

Groups like the NRA and the Christian Coalition are mainstream lobbying groups, but the conservative reaction also took the form of radical Right movements, some of which at least flirted with armed extremism and anti-government militancy. This was best exemplified by the militia movement, which took Waco as a rallying cry.

The militia upsurge of the 1990s did not grow exclusively out of concern about Waco, and something very much like it was very much to be expected. A reaction of this sort tends to occur whenever a liberal Democratic administration replaces a long-established conservative Republican regime, raising fears of a sudden shift to the revolutionary Left. Such a political transition has occurred three times in the past century, in 1932, 1960 and 1992 (For various reasons, the defeat of Gerald Ford in 1976 does not fit the model). On each of those occasions, within two to three years, the nation had an alarming upsurge of radical Right-wing anti-government movements, some of which adopted paramilitary structure and discipline, and trained with weapons. In each case too, these angry movements spun off active terrorist cells, which plotted assassinations and bombings.

But if the notion of militias was new, their scale on this occasion was impressive. By some estimates, by 1995, militias were attracting the support of perhaps a quarter million Americans, and groups existed in all fifty states. Some activists supported the Common Law Courts movement, effectively rejecting all authority above the level of the county, and denying the legitimacy of federal and state governments.¹² Also at its height in these years was an increasingly aggressive anti-abortion movement pledged to direct action, which at its most extreme included the terrorist Army of God.¹³

The ideological foundations of the new Patriot movement varied enormously, from hardcore neo-Nazis and Christian Identity racists to more moderate conservatives who feared that an assault on gun rights was a prelude to a leftist takeover. In fact, the single theme unifying the various strands was that of self-defense, the idea that traditional American liberties and values were under imminent threat from an oppressive globalist/corporatist threat that could neatly be summarized in President George Bush's unfortunate words, the

¹¹ James B. Stewart, *Blood Sport* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); Christopher Ruddy, *The Strange Death Of Vincent Foster* (New York: Free Press, 1997); Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton* (Chicago: Regnery, 1997); Dan E. Moldea, *A Washington Tragedy* (Washington, DC: Regnery 1998).

¹² *The militia movement in the United States: hearing before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information of the Committee on the Judiciary. United States Senate, One Hundred Fourth Congress, first session ... June 15, 1995* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1997); Robert H. Churchill, *To Shake Their Guns In The Tyrant's Face* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

¹³ Jennifer L. Jefferis, *Armed for Life* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Security International, 2011).

New World Order. Linda Thompson's video *America Under Siege* publicized claims about sinister government plots and threats of imminent military takeover, with mysterious black helicopters as key weapons.

In such a vision, two recent incidents perfectly demonstrated the need to mobilize against aggression, and to defend the right of free individuals to live freely apart from a corrupted society. One was the 1992 shooting at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in which federal agents killed the wife of survivalist Randy Weaver. The other was Waco, which neatly incorporated themes of religious liberty as well as gun rights. The difference between the two, of course, was that Ruby Ridge was highly notorious to convinced believers, while the name of Waco was instantly familiar worldwide. It thus offered vastly more potential for recruitment, and for explaining a case to the media.¹⁴

In practical ways too, Waco gave a massive boost to the new Patriot movement by making the administration extremely cautious about taking proactive steps that could provoke any new bloodbath. Since the mid-1980s, federal law enforcement had come down heavily on the nation's sizable and well-armed far Right underground, which at its most extreme shaded into neo-Nazi revolutionaries seeking to implement William Pierce's *Turner Diaries*. This official campaign had included aggressive sedition charges, and the targeting of individual Rightist leaders like Randy Weaver.

The outcome of the Waco affair, though, demanded a fundamental rethinking of strategy. Initially, sects living in remote "compounds" feared the worst, as groups like Montana's Church Universal and Triumphant urgently declared their peaceful credentials in an attempt to avoid becoming the next Davidians. In reality, though, federal authorities were thoroughly spooked, and determined to handle possible future confrontations as delicately as possible. If shooting did break out, they wanted to ensure that they were not to blame. This policy was in evidence in 1996, for instance, when a potentially deadly standoff occurred with the Montana Freeman. Instead of their previous guns-blazing approach, federal authorities sought to negotiate through Rightist intermediaries, including Randy Weaver, until those hard-line militants themselves despaired of the possibility of reasoning with the group.

For several years after 1993, then, Rightist and militia groups had the luxury of organizing and training with minimal threat of federal intervention. Without Waco, it is difficult to imagine such a scenario. Arguably, such non-intervention became so extreme as to permit, briefly, an upsurge of truly dangerous mobilization, of the sort that would soon become notorious following the Oklahoma City attack of April 1995. Missouri's Elohim City, for instance, was the home of members of the terrorist Aryan Republican Army, as well as individuals probably connected with that bombing.¹⁵

Oklahoma City

¹⁴ Alan W. Bock, *Ambush at Ruby Ridge* (Irvine, Calif.: Dickens Press, 1995); Jess Walter, *Every Knee Shall Bow* (New York: Regan Books, 1995); Christopher Whitcomb, *Cold Zero* (New York: Little, Brown, 2001)

¹⁵ Mark Hamm, *Apocalypse in Oklahoma* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Evans-Pritchard, *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton*.

Although media coverage of the militias emphasized their extremist credentials, they were also in dialogue with more mainstream politics, and won the sympathy of some political leaders, particularly in Western states. Responding to its conservative base, the new Congress that assumed its duties in 1995 supported the long-demanded investigation of the Waco affair. The House held ten days of hearings that Summer, the Senate two days in the Fall. (October 1995 also witnessed Senate hearings into the Ruby Ridge affair). Meanwhile, PBS's lengthy *Frontline* investigation brought the affair once more to public attention. However, despite some exposure of government misdeeds and falsehoods, the investigations generally upheld the official version of the final fire as a mass suicide – as did the *Frontline*. And so, of course, did the more searching Danforth inquiry of 1999-2000.¹⁶

Given the surging anti-government sentiment of 1994-95, we might be surprised that the Congressional hearings proved as ineffective or timid as they did. The reason, of course, is that a critical development had intervened, namely the Oklahoma City bombing, which was widely taken as revenge for Waco. We can of course argue about that interpretation. Undeniably, Timothy McVeigh was profoundly affected by Waco memories, but some observers argue that the date was chosen not to commemorate the fire, but rather as a protest against the imminent execution of extremist Richard Wayne Snell (another former resident of Elohim City).¹⁷

Whatever its origins, Oklahoma City transformed the American political landscape, inflicting massive damage on the conservative cause, and forcing moderates to abandon the Patriot movement. The crisis also gave Bill Clinton wholly new status as a symbol of national unity and moderation. Arguably, this event set the stage for the Democratic victory the following year, a triumph that would have seemed inconceivable a very short time before.

Reinforcing Clinton's position was the perception that conservative intransigence had caused the shutdown of the federal government that Fall. After Oklahoma City, any suggestion of

¹⁶ *The federal raid on Ruby Ridge, ID: hearings before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Government Information of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, One Hundred Fourth Congress, first session* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1997); *Activities of federal law enforcement agencies toward the Branch Davidians: joint hearings before the Subcommittee on Crime of the Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives, and the Subcommittee on National Security, International Affairs, and Criminal Justice of the Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, One Hundred Fourth Congress, first session* (US Congress. House Committee on the Judiciary. Subcommittee on Crime (Washington DC: G.P.O., 1996); Joe Rosenbloom, "Waco: More than Simple Blunders?" *Wall Street Journal*, October 17, 1995. For the response to Danforth, see for instance Daryl Lindsey, "The ATF Fired First," *Salon*, July 2000, at http://www.salon.com/2000/07/25/waco_11/; Timothy Lynch, *No Confidence* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2001).

¹⁷ Evans-Pritchard, *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton*; Richard A Serrano, *One of Ours* (New York: Norton, 1998); Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck, *American Terrorist* (New York: Regan Books, 2001); Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Stuart A. Wright, *Patriots, Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

an “anti-government” label betokened savage extremism. However unjustly, that stigma now lighted on Newt Gingrich, and the Republican Congressional leadership.

Reshaping Terrorism

Together with the ghosts of Waco that it evoked, Oklahoma City fundamentally reshaped popular discourse about terrorism. Ultimately, this might have been Waco’s most lasting, and most pernicious, consequence.

In order to understand the debates of the time about terrorism, a little background is in order. Terrorist attacks have occurred frequently in American history, and have been inspired by a wide variety of causes and motives. At different times, though, governments and media vary enormously in how they interpret political violence, and which types of terrorist menace they see as the most threatening. Generally, we see an unsurprising partisan division, by which political conservatives are more concerned with dangers from the left, while liberals (predictably) fear attacks from the right. Conservatives stress terrorism as an external threat, while liberals stress internal aspects. Conservatives are more willing than liberals to accept that terrorist movements have international connections. Scares about domestic terrorism tend to occur under liberal administrations; conservatives are more likely to be exercised about externally-based threats. I do not offer these distinctions as a hard and fast rule that is valid at all times and places, but rather as a general conceptual model. And as in most such debates, neither side has absolute truth on its side.¹⁸

Since the late 1970s, dominant conservatives had found useful mileage in the external terrorism threat, blaming the ongoing wave of international terrorism on state sponsorship by the Communist bloc, in alliance with Middle Eastern nations like Libya, Iran and Syria. It was widely believed that these countries supplied finance and weaponry, in addition to training facilities and safe havens for fugitives. Terrorism was the chief tool of those seeking to destroy the West, namely NATO plus Israel, in “The Other World War.” “Real” terrorism was, by definition, anti-American and foreign, or foreign-inspired, rather than Rightist or domestic. This fact demanded greater arms spending by the West, and an intensification of the Cold War, themes that meshed well with Reagan era conservatism. Following the decline of Soviet power, the enemy was increasingly identified in Middle Eastern and Islamic terms. Each new terrorist act, each hijacking or airliner bombing gave new strength to these conservative interpretations. These were the views commonly presented in the news media, in fictional presentations and popular culture treatments.

Matters changed rapidly following Clinton’s inauguration in 1993. While the new administration downplayed external threats, it placed far more attention on the danger posed by domestic terrorism, especially from right-wing and anti-government groups. It was in 1993 and 1994 that the government started treating antiabortion violence as terrorism, which the media contextualized together with Waco. Both seemingly illustrated the apocalyptic views and fanatical behavior of the Christian ultra-Right, no less than its penchant for armed violence.

¹⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Images of Terror* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 2003).

Your Paranoia Is Real

Closely tied to the attack on antiabortion terrorism was a heavy new emphasis on domestic ultra-Right militancy, on the militia and patriot movements. Both government and mass media repeatedly used Oklahoma City as a rhetorical weapon against the militia movement, suggesting that militia supporters were terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. For some authors, this linkage extended not just to militias, but to the mainstream anti-Clinton Right, including the NRA and the Republican leadership.¹⁹ News stories, editorials, and cartoons all presented the view of militias as crypto-Nazis, linked to white racist movements and far right skinheads. An impressive outpouring of books, peaking in the election year of 1996, warned of an imminent terrorist disaster from this gathering storm. Typical titles raised the shadow of *America's Militia Threat*, of *Terrorists Among Us*, of *The Birth of Paramilitary Terrorism in the Heartland*. One book warned of the *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning*.²⁰

Aggravating such fears were the nerve gas attacks carried out in Japan during 1995 by the Aum Shinrikyo apocalyptic cult. The firm belief that Oklahoma City had been intended as direct revenge for the Waco raid suggested a direct linkage between cults and domestic terrorism, while the Aum Shinrikyo affair raised the likelihood that future attacks might be biological or chemical in nature. Might religious groups that believed in Doomsday try and precipitate such an event? Doomsday cults now became a hot media item.²¹

The more widespread such concerns became, the easier it was to dismiss the older idea that terrorism was ipso facto a Middle Eastern and Arab prerogative. Just as militias and pro-life groups were obvious casualties of the new mapping of the terrorism problem, so there were obvious beneficiaries, who were also among the leading supporters of the administration. Just as feminists could both use the new stereotypes to link pro-life activism to the armed

¹⁹ Jack Anderson, *Inside the NRA* (Beverly Hills, CA, 1996).

²⁰ James Corcoran, *Bitter Harvest: The Birth of Paramilitary Terrorism in the Heartland* (New York: Penguin, 1995); Thomas Halpern, *Beyond the Bombing: The Militia Menace Grows* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1995); Robert Snow, *The Militia Threat: Terrorists Among Us* (New York: Plenum, 1995); Kenneth S. Stern, *Force Upon the Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Philip Lamy, *Millennium Rage* (New York: Plenum, 1996); *False Patriots* (Montgomery, Ala.: Southern Poverty Law Center, 1996); Richard Abanes, *American Militias* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1996); Morris Dees and James Corcoran, *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996); John George and Laird Wilcox, *American Extremists* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1996); Joel Dyer, *Harvest of Rage: Why Oklahoma City is Only the Beginning* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998); David A. Neiwert, *In God's Country* (Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 1999) Mark S. Hamm, *In Bad Company* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001). For the militia panic of these years, see Steven M. Chermak, *Searching for a Demon* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002).

²¹ David E. Kaplan and Andrew Marshall, *The Cult at the End of the World* (New York: Crown, 1996); Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer, eds., *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying The World To Save It* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

extremism of the clinic bombers, so too gay rights groups could discredit antigay agitation, and black civil rights organizations could attack their political enemies. In each case, the suggestion was that right-wing activism was part of a spectrum that had at its extremes the naked violence of bombers, militias, or racist skinheads. This broad contextualization helped to justify defensive legal measures, especially in hate crime laws. In the 1980s, when terrorism was seen as made in Moscow, the response to the problem was to be found in foreign policy, intelligence, and military intervention. Now, though, terrorism and political "hate" were to be combated by interventionist political liberalism, reinforced by the courts.

Just as Middle Eastern villains had dominated popular culture treatments of the 1980s, so racist and religious fanatics now took center stage in fictional terrorism. Militias, skinheads and neo-Nazis became staple villains in 1980s films like *Talk Radio* and *Betrayed*, and much more frequently in the Clinton years, in productions like *American History X*. Between 1996 and 2001, the same themes became obligatory in television series, where countless police and detective shows found themselves dealing with ultra-Right villains. Waco-style cults featured in the very popular *The X Files*. The 1996 episode "The Field Where I Died" depicted the Temple of the Seven Stars, a heavily armed suicide cult that abuses children. Recalling Koresh's given name, the sect is led by the polygamous *Vernon* Ephesian.

The high-water mark of Far Right villainy in the cinema occurred in the 1999 film *Arlington Road*, which tells how a terrorism expert comes to suspect that his too-perfect neighbors are in fact the masterminds of a massive Far Right/militia conspiracy. (The film begins with a perverse reworking of *Ruby Ridge*, in which federal agents become the martyrs). The movie culminates in the destruction of the FBI headquarters in Washington D.C., on lines very similar to the description in *The Turner Diaries*. *Arlington Road* depicts a heroic liberal administration fighting monstrously evil anti-government forces, which are clearly a pressing danger to democracy. As the film's publicity warns, "Your paranoia is real!"²²

The lethal problem with all these treatments is that a society totally focused on one kind of terror threat tends to lose interest in any rival views, which meant that for a few critical years, Middle Eastern and Islamic dangers were minimized if not actively mocked. Despite the surging danger of Islamist terrorism associated with al-Qaeda, and deadly attacks on US interests in East Africa and elsewhere, any attempt to refocus attention on this peril seemed hysterical or ill founded. During those post-Oklahoma City years, every informed person knew that the real terror threat was domestic and Rightist, and it was ludicrous to take seriously such posturing buffoons as Osama bin Laden. From this standpoint, even paying attention to such issues was a likely symptom of Islamophobia and racist stereotyping.

Wrong-headed interpretation is one thing, but it also has critical policy consequences. Because Islamist terrorism was so neglected in these years, officials who identified potential plots faced an uphill battle in securing resources for investigations, or convincing their superiors of a clear and present danger. Those struggles emerge repeatedly in the post-

²² On a trivia note, *Arlington Road* was Jeff Bridges's next starring role after the far more valuable *The Big Lebowski*.

mortem examinations of the policy disasters that culminated in the all-too-real terror attacks of September 2001.²³

I can think of no more appropriate way to draw these themes together than by discussing Kevin Smith's 2011 film *Red State*, which views Waco through 9/11 lenses. The film impresses by being a total equal opportunity offender. It uses the grimmest possible vision of the besieged cult, the "Five Points Church at Cooper's Dell," which is based on the real-life Westboro Baptist Church as much as the Davidians. Members are bloodthirsty trigger-happy fanatics led by an utterly evil demagogue, and they double as a clandestine death squad killing real and alleged homosexuals. On the other side we find the ATF – in this case, the "Arson Task Force," – which operates under cold blooded secret orders to exterminate every member of the group, men, women and children, on the ludicrous pretense that they are domestic terrorists. The two conspiracy theories coexist perfectly. Moreover, this is also a 9/11 film. ATF bureaucrats explain that as a result of that crisis, they now have the power to label any act of religious violence as terrorism, and to imprison the offenders for life.

With some sadness, I note that this film might do more to shape the image of "the Truth about Waco" among modern-day young people more than any number of sober studies and academic conferences!

Remembering Waco

I have suggested that Waco's impact extended to national and even global politics, and that it shaped American attitudes during the Clinton years. Looking at such widespread effects, it is easy to forget the simple situation at the heart of the affair; and that those mighty issues were so irrelevant to the humble souls who traveled to Mount Carmel seeking simple Biblical truth concerning the End Times. The fires of Waco mattered so much because they burnt at a critical turning point in American politics, and in its cultural debates.

²³ Jenkins, *Images of Terror*.