



As law enforcement militarized itself, so did certain civilians, and so it went, back and forth. A “threat spiral” began. Illustration by Emiliano Ponzi

BOOKS

A FIRE STARTED IN WACO. THIRTY YEARS LATER, IT’S

STILL BURNING

Behind the Oklahoma City bombing and even the January 6th attack was a military-style assault in Texas that galvanized the far right.

By **Daniel Immerwahr**

May 1, 2023

Listen to this story



0:00 / 29:47



On March 25th, at the first big rally of his current electoral campaign, Donald Trump explained his role in history. In 2016, he told the crowd of supporters, he'd been their "voice." Now it was different. "I am your warrior, I am your justice," he announced. "I am your retribution."

Those words, ominous enough on their own, seemed more so in light of the locale. Trump hadn't wanted to speak in "one of those fifty-fifty areas," he explained, but somewhere his support was "close to a hundred per cent." He chose Waco, Texas, best known for a fifty-one-day standoff outside the city in 1993, between a religious sect called the Branch Davidians and the Department of Justice. The date of Trump's speech put it during the siege's thirtieth anniversary.

The siege, which culminated in a fire in the Branch Davidian complex, killed four federal agents and eighty-two Branch Davidians, including their leader, David Koresh. Given Koresh's messianic tendencies and end-times prophecies, many shrugged this off as just deserts for the zealots from "Wacko, Texas," as Jay Leno joked at the time.

Yet for others the siege was a sickening display of state power. Waco helped kick the militia movement into high gear. Timothy McVeigh's biographers Lou Michel and Dan Herbeck said that it was the largest "turning point in his life," provoking him to bomb a federal building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995—the second anniversary of the Waco fire. A young Alex Jones became obsessed with Waco; it led him to start his Web site Infowars.

Waco helped McVeigh, the militias, and Jones see the state as a violent enemy of the people. That view, once marginal, has elbowed its way to the mainstream—it is now Trump's, too. Where better to insist that the "weaponization of our justice system" is the "central issue of our time," as Trump did in his Waco speech, than near the place where an F.B.I. raid resulted in dozens of deaths, including those of more than twenty children?

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



The ashes of Waco are still blowing around. This year has already seen the release of two television series, Netflix’s “Waco: American Apocalypse” and Showtime’s “Waco: The Aftermath,” and two substantial books, Jeff Guinn’s “Waco” (Simon & Schuster) and Kevin Cook’s excellent “Waco Rising” (Holt). In 2003, on the tenth anniversary, infantry divisions were in Iraq, and Waco was fading from view. Yet now, on the thirtieth anniversary, private militias roam widely, and Waco feels like yesterday.

For someone who claimed to be the Lamb of God—prophesied in the Book of Revelation to open the scroll’s seven seals and initiate the apocalypse—David Koresh had a wobbly start. He was originally named Vernon Wayne Howell, or, as his schoolmates called him, Mister Retardo. Cook notes that Koresh failed first grade twice, was shunted into special education, and dropped out of ninth grade with a grade-point average he described as “you don’t want to know.”

At eighteen, Koresh got his first girlfriend, a sixteen-year-old he referred to as “jailbait,” pregnant. He was elated (“Me, Mister Retardo—going to have a baby!”), then crushed when she had an abortion. Her father kicked him out of their house, and his church, the Seventh-day Adventists, “disfellowshipped” him for seducing another girl, a church elder’s fifteen-year-old daughter.

Koresh’s fortunes changed at around twenty-one, when he found a home among the Branch Davidians at their Waco commune, Mount Carmel. The Branch Davidians were a small offshoot of the Seventh-

day Adventists, dedicated to intense Bible study, who shared the Adventist belief in Jesus Christ's imminent return. Koresh secured his place among them by his impressive scriptural fluency and by having an affair with their leader, Lois Roden, then in her sixties. At twenty-four, he abandoned Roden and married a fourteen-year-old church member, Rachel Jones—a union that was, because her parents consented, legal in Texas.

Koresh turned out to be exceptionally good at talking people into things. Talking the Branch Davidians into accepting his leadership. Talking them into believing that he was the Lamb. Talking his teenage wife and her parents into letting him take Rachel's twelve-year-old sister, Michele, as an additional wife. Talking Mount Carmel's men into celibacy, and talking its women and girls into bearing as many as seventeen of his children.

There was another thing Koresh talked his followers into. In 1992, a box being delivered to a Davidian-owned business broke open. Dozens of grenade casings spilled out.

Purchasing empty grenade shells, it should be said, isn't a crime. But it smelled enough like one to prompt a months-long investigation by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. A.T.F. agents concluded that Mount Carmel possessed a formidable arsenal and applied for a search warrant.

Cook observes that the assembled evidence fell far short of showing that Mount Carmel must urgently be stormed. The Branch Davidians

spoke of an impending apocalypse, yes, but they'd been talking that way for decades. Mount Carmel had existed in various forms since the nineteen-thirties; it posed no obvious threat to outsiders.

What's more, the Branch Davidians had an explanation for their arsenal, as the A.T.F. knew. To make money, they sold weapons at gun shows, along with military rations, gas masks, ammo vests, and hunting jackets, onto which they sewed dummy grenades. Their wares included automatic weapons. These weren't illegal, but the A.T.F., in its search-warrant petition, cited "circumstantial evidence" that the Branch Davidians were "converting semi-automatic weapons to fully automatic without having paid the proper fees."

"It may be true that we stepped over the borderline of certain regulations," Koresh allowed. In truth, Koresh's foot was far over the line. We now have copious evidence of his having sex with underage children, including congressional testimony from a girl Koresh molested, with her mother's acquiescence, when she was ten. Yet the authorities struggled to show this at the time. Child-protective services had visited Mount Carmel without finding cause for action.

Nevertheless, the A.T.F. got its warrant and, fatefully, decided on a "dynamic entry." Rather than arresting Koresh outside Mount Carmel—as they could easily have done, since Koresh came and went freely—or even announcing their approach, federal agents staged a raid. To prepare, they trained with Green Berets at a nearby military base. They arrived at Mount Carmel on February 28, 1993, seventy-six of them, with combat gear, submachine guns, sniper rifles, and

concussion grenades.

They would need it all. Whoever shot first, Mount Carmel became a battleground; one agent recalled that the gunfire was so clamorous that he couldn't hear his own pistol. Four A.T.F. agents and six Branch Davidians died in this shoot-out. Yet Koresh, shot twice, still lived, and Mount Carmel, riddled with bullet holes, remained unbreached.

As the raid stretched into a siege, the F.B.I. took command and deployed an élite tactical unit, the Hostage Rescue Team. But who were the hostages? The Branch Davidians lived at Mount Carmel, and they seemed uninterested in leaving their home to place themselves or their children in state custody. They'd long expected to die for their faith. And, until their Saviour collected their souls, they had large stores of military-style rations.

Outside a cordon surrounding Mount Carmel, onlookers gathered and vendors sold merch. One T-shirt, treating "Waco" as an acronym, summed up matters well: "We Ain't Comin Out."

It could have been the slogan for the decade. A surprising number of memorable nineties headlines involved armed confrontations between civilians and the authorities. In 1992, in reaction to the police beating of an unarmed Black man, Rodney King—and to years of aggressive policing—Los Angeles broke out into five days of violence that killed sixty-three people. Later that year, a siege and a shoot-out at a white supremacist's cabin in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, left three dead. Then came Waco (1993), McVeigh's Oklahoma City bombing (1995),

and the Unabomber's arrest (1996). In 1999, two teen-agers in Columbine, Colorado, seeking to top McVeigh's body count, waged war on their own high school. The next year, dozens of armed federal agents stormed a house in Miami to seize a six-year-old, Elián González.

What caused this? Two scholars of nineties violence, the historian Kathleen Belew and the sociologist Stuart A. Wright, point to militarization, not just of law enforcement but of civilians, too. After the Vietnam War, the weapons and tactics of war flowed into domestic life. In her book "Bring the War Home," Belew describes political violence in the U.S. as the "catastrophic ricochet" of fighting abroad.

By the nineties, those ricochets were constant. The end of the Cold War relieved the country of a long-standing foe, but it didn't bring peace. Rather, there was what the historian Michael Sherry, in "The Punitive Turn in American Life," calls a "hydraulic relationship" between war-fighting and crime-fighting: the fewer enemies the United States found beyond its borders, the more it found within them. The Cold War's conclusion had brought "unrivalled peace" to the world, President Bill Clinton crowed, yet to the United States it also brought amped-up wars on crime and drugs. Sherry notes the débuts, in 1989 and 1990, respectively, of "Cops" and "Law & Order," wildly popular television shows about arresting and incarcerating people.

Locking people up was nothing new. But, by the nineties, the line that

the United States had long drawn between its police and its military was badly blurred. Police departments relied increasingly on units, such as SWAT teams, that used military weapons, vehicles, equipment, outfits, and tactics.

Such units are “paramilitary” because normally, by law, the actual military can’t be used for domestic policing. Nevertheless, the late Cold War introduced significant loopholes into that law, especially where drugs were concerned. (It was by claiming, implausibly, that Koresh might be operating a meth lab that the A.T.F. secured military support and helicopters for its disastrous raid on Mount Carmel.) And arms-makers, desperate for customers after the Cold War’s end, found other ways to push military or “dual-use” hardware onto law enforcement. Local police chiefs were offered tanks and grenade launchers.

Civilians could get much of what they wanted, too. The Firearm Owners’ Protection Act of 1986 rolled back gun regulations and permitted unlicensed “hobbyists” to sell weapons at gun shows. Between 1987 and 1993, firearms sales from manufacturers nearly doubled. By 1995, there were more than a hundred shows around the country each weekend.

The Branch Davidians worked the gun-show circuit hard. Gun owners’ fears that Clinton would ban assault-weapon sales (which he did, sort of, in 1994) created a frantic, lucrative market. The more law enforcement armed itself, the more nervous civilians followed suit, and so it went, back and forth. Stuart Wright, in his 2007 book, “Patriots,

Politics, and the Oklahoma City Bombing,” calls this the “threat spiral.”

Gun advocates warned of a tyrannical state using black helicopters to subdue the populace, thus turning “black helicopters” into shorthand for unhinged paranoia. But it’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you, and the helicopters, at least, were real—some flew over Waco. Sherry writes that, by the eighties, the wall separating the police from the military had already crumbled to the point where helicopters were “swooping down on alleged California pot growers,” some “blaring Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries.’ ”

David Koresh was not the first Koresh. Around the turn of the twentieth century, another prophet took the name Koresh, claimed to be the Lamb, and led a sexually scandalous commune, Jeff Guinn points out. Theologically, the two Koreshes were similar, but their fates diverged sharply. When tensions between the first Koreshans and the authorities came to a head, in 1906, the result was a brawl that broke the prophet’s eyeglasses. In 1993, Cook tells us, the forces that the F.B.I. amassed at Waco included sixteen tanks, among them two sixty-eight-ton Abrams tanks—the Pentagon’s largest. The Branch Davidians could communicate with the press only by hanging bedsheets with messages written on them out of windows. One read “RODNEY KING WE UNDERSTAND.”

Timothy McVeigh, devouring the news from Florida, drove to Waco. Half a dozen federal agents briefly stopped him outside Mount

Carmel, and McVeigh later remembered thinking that he could have killed them all with a grenade. Nevertheless, he limited himself to selling threat-spirally bumper stickers (“FEAR THE GOVERNMENT THAT FEARS YOUR GUN”) and left after a few days.

Koresh, meanwhile, exuded confidence. “You’re the Goliath, and we’re David,” he told a negotiator. Of course, whereas the Biblical David had a sling and five smooth stones, the modern Davidians had a .50-calibre sniper rifle that could shoot chunks off car engines. They also had automatic weapons and more than a million rounds of ammunition. They unfurled another bedsheet: “FLAMES AWAIT.”

How to proceed against a heavily armed apocalyptic commune containing dozens of children? The F.B.I. hoped to smoke the Branch Davidians out with tear gas. But, predictably, Koresh’s followers had gas masks, and they’d sealed off their complex. To make an opening, tanks rammed Mount Carmel. Then, live on television, it burst into flames.

Who set the fire remains a contentious matter. Mount Carmel was a jerry-built mess of plywood, “a tinderbox on its best day,” Cook writes. And April 19th—when the Branch Davidians had plugged the windows with mattresses and hay bales to keep gas out, and tanks were punching down walls to get it in—was not its best day. Although the F.B.I.’s actions easily could have sparked a fire, surveillance recordings and survivor testimonies suggest that some Branch Davidians sought to speed the end along by arson. Tellingly, many died not from burns but from gunshots, killed by their own hands or

by fellow commune members. Someone shot Koresh in the forehead.

Federal agents had arrived at Mount Carmel with a search warrant. They left, fifty-one days later, with a pile of charred corpses. Feds and Branch Davidians had together turned “cops and robbers” into Armageddon, with opposing armies arrayed on a field of battle.

Timothy McVeigh had sought to join that battle. He'd been changing his car's oil for his return to Waco, aiming vaguely to “go down there and do something,” when the fire erupted. The tragedy consumed his thoughts. He handed out pamphlets and sold spliced-together videos at gun shows which he claimed proved the government's perfidy. “Tim, why are you always focussing on Waco?” his father asked. For McVeigh, Waco was the “straw that broke the back of Lady Liberty,” the “first blood of war.”

A white supremacist with a grievance against the government was not a new phenomenon. When McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, in Oklahoma City, at the age of twenty-six, he wore a T-shirt featuring the words of John Wilkes Booth: “*Sic semper tyrannis.*” The reference was apt. When Booth was twenty-six, he'd also committed a spectacular act of anti-government violence in the name of white power.

But if McVeigh was an old type he was also the product of the new militarization. McVeigh grew up near a military base, and he was gun-obsessed from childhood. He joined the Army, where he remembered being made to scream “Blood makes the grass grow! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

twenty times a day during training until his “throat was raw.” In the Gulf War, he killed two Iraqis and won a Bronze Star.

McVeigh quit the Army, yet he never fully accepted civilian life. His Army friends remained his most important contacts; he’d met Terry Nichols, his collaborator in the bombing, on his first day of basic training. He made other contacts at gun shows. He attended roughly eighty, where he distributed cards with the address of an F.B.I. sharpshooter who’d killed a woman at Ruby Ridge (and who’d been at Waco), hoping to spur an assassination. He also sold flares and flare launchers, for use, he suggested, against the “A.T.F. bastards” in helicopters.

Booth, McVeigh’s model, had brandished a knife and assassinated Abraham Lincoln with a derringer, a one-shot lady’s pistol. McVeigh, in contrast, was a walking armory. On the day of the bombing, he carried a Glock .45 with a Black Talon “cop killer” bullet in the chamber, plus a fully loaded ammunition magazine. The seven-thousand-pound bomb McVeigh built was a homemade device—barrels of fertilizer soaked in racing fuel—but it wasn’t an amateur job. With tactical acumen, McVeigh arranged the barrels as a “shaped charge” to point the blast toward the building.

The Oklahoma City bombing, which McVeigh called his “retaliatory strike” against an “increasingly militaristic and violent” state, damaged three hundred and twenty-four buildings and wounded more than five hundred people. It killed a hundred and sixty-eight, more than the number of Americans killed in combat in the Gulf War.

The journalist Jeffrey Toobin covered McVeigh's trial for ABC News, and for this publication, too. At the time, Toobin saw McVeigh as a deranged criminal. But Toobin has since concluded that he'd "failed to understand" McVeigh's place "in the broader slipstream of American history." His probing new book, "Homegrown" (Simon & Schuster), takes another look.

In Toobin's view, it wasn't just militarism that made McVeigh—it was Republicanism. McVeigh's politics congealed at a time when Representative Newt Gingrich and the broadcaster Rush Limbaugh, champions of "an ascendant right-wing authoritarianism," were injecting a new "rhetorical violence" into politics, Toobin writes. They compared the Clinton Administration to the Third Reich, whispered of dark conspiracies, and proposed rebellion. For McVeigh, who "took Limbaugh both seriously and literally," the way to "push the Republican revolution one step further" was to bomb a federal building.

But, if McVeigh followed the Republicans, he also walked less travelled paths. Both Kathleen Belew and Stuart Wright (who consulted for McVeigh's defense) stress McVeigh's place in the white-power movement. Rather than an impressionable Republican who listened to too much Limbaugh, they argue, McVeigh is better understood as a soldier in an organized paramilitary campaign against the United States.

That campaign proceeded in secret. Belew and Wright emphasize its strategy of "leaderless resistance": instead of building a hierarchical

organization with a large membership, white-power activists developed disconnected cells of militants. To synchronize without communicating, those cells relied on shared playbooks, including, notably, a 1978 novel by William Pierce, “The Turner Diaries,” which describes an apocalyptic race war. The book’s hero detonates a fertilizer bomb in a truck at a federal building, just as McVeigh did. McVeigh bought boxes of “The Turner Diaries” to distribute at gun shows, and he took a photocopied page from the book to the bombing.

Was McVeigh coordinating with others? He had written to his sister of being in a “Special Forces Group involved in criminal activity.” Unquestionably, he’d had contact with the white supremacists of Elohim City, a compound in Oklahoma. This matters because, in the eighties, terrorists connected to Elohim City had pursued, as their “ultimate goal,” the “bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City,” according to the former white-power leader Kerry Noble. An A.T.F. informant at Elohim City recalled talk of a “racial holy war” to be launched on April 19, 1995, with bombings of federal buildings in Oklahoma City or Texas. (Showtime’s “Waco: The Aftermath” makes much of Elohim City.)

McVeigh’s lawyer, seeking to blur his client’s culpability, pointed to Elohim City. The prosecution, led by Merrick Garland in the Justice Department, homed in on McVeigh and Nichols as the sole perpetrators. Garland’s focussed strategy worked, in that McVeigh was convicted and executed. (Nichols is serving a hundred and sixty-one consecutive life sentences.) Yet even Toobin, who dismisses the

Elohim City connection as a conspiracy theory, faults Garland for having presented an overly narrow, “dangerously misleading” version of events.

Before his execution, McVeigh was incarcerated in a Colorado supermax prison, where he befriended both Ted Kaczynski, known as the Unabomber, and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the Al Qaeda-tied terrorist who’d attacked the World Trade Center in 1993. At the time, the media portrayed McVeigh as a crazed loner, like Kaczynski. In hindsight, though, he seems more like Yousef: a soldier in an invisible army. Yousef, for his part, said that he’d never met anyone with “so similar a personality to my own.”

There is a long history of law enforcement besieging and attacking U.S. communities. In 1973, federal agents had a months-long standoff, with gunfire, against Native activists at Wounded Knee (itself the famous site of an 1890 Army massacre). In 1985, police bombed the Black commune MOVE in Philadelphia, sparking a fire that burned sixty-one homes and caused eleven deaths.

The siege in Waco, however, killed white people. Russell Means, an Oglala Lakota activist who’d been at the Wounded Knee standoff, wrote a blues, “Waco: The White Man’s Wounded Knee,” welcoming whites to the Indigenous experience: “Soldiers burning babies is nothing new. / It happened to us, now it’s happening to you.”

Now it’s happening to you. The Branch Davidians were actually multiracial, but they were white enough for their plight to set alarms

ringing. The anthropologist Susan Lepselter, who studied U.F.O. believers in the nineties, found that, for many, Waco had “crystallized” their distrustful world view. After the event, the leader of the Heaven’s Gate movement advised his U.F.O.-believing followers to arm themselves in preparation for a lethal raid by “the authorities.” When it didn’t come, the group, in 1997, sought death another way: via mass suicide.

Two years later, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, inspired by McVeigh, attacked their high school in Columbine, Colorado. They set April 19, 1999—the sixth anniversary of the Waco fire and the fourth of McVeigh’s bombing—as “Judgment Day.” (Trouble securing ammunition pushed it back to April 20th.) They nearly succeeded in their aim to kill more people than McVeigh did. Though they’re remembered as school shooters, Harris and Klebold also planted enormous bombs, which, had they detonated, “would have killed five hundred people,” Dave Cullen writes in his 2009 book, “Columbine.”

Waco was especially meaningful to the paramilitary movement. Between 1993 and 1995, more than eight hundred militias and Patriot groups formed. These groups, important vehicles for white power, differed from the mixed-race and Israel-sympathizing Branch Davidians. Still, Waco (along with Ruby Ridge) was their rallying cry, incorporated into calls for a race war and for attacks on the state. An undercover agent working among them recalled, “There was hardly one militia member I met who *didn’t* mention Waco as his awakening.”

Alex Jones was nineteen during the Waco siege. As Cook explains, he was haunted by the event, and raised funds to rebuild the Branch Davidians' church. In his twenties, Jones hosted a popular talk-radio show in Austin, yet his Waco monomania got it cancelled. So, in 1999, he launched Infowars, an outlet all his own.

At first, Jones's ravings seemed harmless. "He was this hyper guy that we'd all kind of make fun of," the Austin director Richard Linklater, who cast Jones in his films "Waking Life" and "A Scanner Darkly," recalled. But Jones collected a fervid fan base, including, notably, President Trump. "It is surreal," Jones reflected, "to talk about issues here on air and word-for-word hear Trump say it two days later."

Jones helped arrange the rally at the Ellipse on January 6, 2021. Directly afterward, insurgents attacked the U.S. Capitol—an act that also takes place in "The Turner Diaries." January 6th was Waco in reverse; this time, civilians stormed the federal government's stronghold.

Merrick Garland, now the Attorney General, is overseeing the January 6th investigation—"one of the largest, most complex, and most resource-intensive investigations in our history," he has said. Still, it's hard to imagine that this will extinguish the flames. With social media, violent rhetoric spreads more easily than ever. Toobin observes that McVeigh—travelling the gun-show circuit, haltingly making friends—"had an analog radicalization." His counterparts today undergo "digital radicalization," which, Toobin warns, is "much faster and more efficient."

And so Waco still matters; it's history in the present tense. Charles Pace, the pastor of the church that Alex Jones helped rebuild there, considers Trump the "battering ram that God is using to bring down the Deep State of Babylon." Trump sees himself similarly. At Waco, he warned that the "biggest threat" to the country was "high-level politicians" in both parties. The 2024 election will be the "final battle," Trump promised. "That's gonna be the big one." ♦

Published in the print edition of the May 8, 2023, issue, with the headline "Home Fires."

New Yorker Favorites

- The Titan submersible was "an accident waiting to happen."
- Notes from Prince Harry's ghostwriter.
- The best jokes of 2023.
- What happened to San Francisco, really?
- The novelist whose inventions went too far.
- Why 2023 was the year of

Ozempic.

- Listening to Taylor Swift in prison.

Sign up for our daily newsletter
to receive the best stories from
The New Yorker.

*Daniel Immerwahr teaches
history at Northwestern
University and is the author of
“How to Hide an Empire: A
History of the Greater United
States.”*

BOOKS & FICTION

Short stories and poems,
plus author interviews,
profiles, and tales from
the world of literature.

E-mail

address

Email	Sign up
-------	---------

By signing up, you agree to our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy & Cookie Statement](#). This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the [Google Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

READ MORE

NEWS DESK

What Was Hamas Thinking?

One of the group's senior political leaders explains its strategy.

By Adam Rasgon

AMERICAN CHRONICLES

What Happens to a School Shooter's Sister?

Twenty-five years ago, Kristin Kinkel's brother, Kip, killed their parents and

LETTER FROM ISRAEL

In the Cities of Killing

The Hamas massacre, the assaults on Gaza, and what comes after.

By David Remnick

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

Lost in the Mountains

In the nineteen-sixties, my sleepaway camp was delightfully under-supervised. Then a camper

opened fire at
their high
school. Today,
she is close
with Kip—and
still reckoning
with his crimes.

**By Jennifer
Gonnerman**

went missing.

By David Owen

 [Cookies Settings](#)