

The Power and The Prophet

BAD Broadside #9

There has been a great deal of criticism in the popular press and elsewhere of the government's actions in the Branch Davidian debacle in Waco. The Quincy Patriot Ledger (4/21/93) classified the event as "among the worst disasters in the history of American law enforcement". The ATF and the FBI are being taken over the coals for the methods used and their failure to achieve a pacific outcome to the siege. Reno and Clinton are faulted for lacking the prescience to anticipate a disaster of the magnitude that occurred, and for letting the feds force the issue. Why didn't they, it is asked, keep up the "sanctions" until the Davidians got tired and came out? What excuse was there for losing patience and precipitating the holocaust that occurred? Many have even asked why the ATF felt it had to invade the Davidian compound in gangbusters style at all. The Davidians were out there in the middle of nowhere not bothering anyone, and Koresh could have been seized away from the compound. Obviously the Davidians should have been quite simply left alone.

Government sources offered a number of inadequate responses, from Reno's frank acceptance of responsibility (for the failure at the end, not the whole thing) to the defensive drivel from law enforcement types who tried to lay the blame for their own bungling on Koresh, who refused to play fair. The stockpile of legally purchased small arms is cited as the reason for the initial precipitate action. Rumors of undefined "child abuse," that fashionable all-round excuse for frantic intervention, was among the reasons given for the final attack. But the real reason for the extreme nature of the siege and the attack wasn't over a question of guilt. It wasn't what Koresh and company had allegedly done, or even what they might do as armed sex-mad religious maniacs that was the problem. It was their unrepentant challenge to the authority of the State.

Many sense an inevitability about the whole thing, and in a very important way they are right. Given the authoritarian nature of both the State and the Davidian sect, once the conflict was engaged, the only way it could end was in the destruction of the offending party. It has long been an anarchistic truism that the State reserves for itself a monopoly on coercive control. As Benjamin Tucker says flatly, "Aggression, invasion, government are interconvertible terms. The essence of government is control, or the attempt to control." The State will not and cannot allow an independent authority to evade this control within its jurisdiction. Koresh et al have been denounced for futilely holding out against the government rather than negotiating. It was indeed futile, but quite possibly they were aware that there was no real "negotiation" possible. It is a cardinal principal of the State that no one (apparently not even the heads of rival States) can hold themselves "above the law"; i.e., independent of the authority of the State. Therefore the only question is how the law will be avenged, not whether it will be. The only option open was complete surrender and abasement, after which the details and extent of punitive retribution could be adjusted.

The Davidian sect assumed and acted as if it had independent authority by virtue of the dictates of christian doctrine. They wouldn't play by the rules and give in like nice little subjects of the State. Yet anarchists should resist the temptation to identify with these victims of governmental repression. The tragedy occurred because both sides shared a fatal weakness -- a hypertrophy of authority. Religion, especially the christian religion, has long claimed an authority that transcends that of the State in certain matters, although few groups are so naive as to force the issue to its logical conclusion. As anarchists have long insisted, such authority inevitably leads to disaster. David Koresh and his followers -- it is nonsensical to pretend they were all his dupes -- chose to follow the dictates of their faith rather than those of the State, as other religious groups from the Pilgrims to the Mormons have in the past. And as in the past, they suffered by challenging the power of the State.

The authority of the State is maintained through the demand that its laws and regulations be acceded to without question. It customarily took an open and active breach of these laws, an actual perpetration of a "crime," to precipitate a coercive response by the government. However, it has now become the fashion to anticipate possible breaches and to move against potential "criminals" who through their beliefs and activities (such as espousing religious, sexual or political nonconformity) may at some point transgress the myriad rules and regulations the government has at its disposal for excusing coercion. Following an often brutal and intimidating experience at the hands (and feet) of agencies such as the ATF and the DEA, the social penitent is supposed to be led away to be made an example of to other would-be dissidents. When the invaded refuse to play to the State's script by not surrendering and confessing their subjugation, they must be destroyed (socially or biologically).

By asserting their own authority over that of the government, the Davidians laid down an irresistible challenge. The State took up the challenge, and as is usually the case, won. The Davidians were attacked, reviled, humiliated, demonized in the press and finally, although inadvertently, physically destroyed. There may be considerable criticism now and perhaps some jobs will be lost or some ameliorating statutes passed, but the State itself will not be affected. As long as the criticism focuses only on the manner in which the repression was handled rather than questioning the prerogative of the government to repress at will, nothing will change.

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