

The Wars Waco Revealed: *Reflecting on Waco Twenty-Five Years Later* | BY KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE



The Fire at Mount Carmel, April 19, 1993 (Photo: Time & Life Pictures)

IMAGE SOURCE: TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGE, [HTTPS://WWW.CHRON.COM/NEWS/HOUSTON-TEXAS/ARTICLE/LOOKING-BACK-AT-THE-BRANCH-DAVIDIAN-SIEGE-24-11080656.PHP](https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/looking-back-at-the-branch-davidian-siege-24-11080656.php)

This past quarter I taught a new class for graduating religious-studies students planning to serve as pastors within the Seventh-day Adventist church.¹ It was an upper-division, biblical-studies, “topics” seminar that started with the Jewish apocalyptic roots of the book of Revelation. We then considered the various ways people read the book of Revelation, with a focus on the importance of the book for our church since the beginning of the Advent movement. The course concluded by considering the ethical ramifications of our interpretations of this final book of Scripture, and the potential of its moral-vision language for shaping the behavior of contemporary believers. One

of our two-hour sessions was devoted to the tragedy at Waco. I would learn in our discussion that only one of my students was alive at the time, and he was a one-year-old. It made me feel old. These graduating seniors were exploring for the first time an event that had significantly shaped the early years of my own ministry, as well as my graduate studies and scholarship as a New Testament professor teaching in an Adventist university. Has it really been twenty-five years? Given all that has taken place since, how do we now reflect on the tragedy?

What have we learned? Has anything changed?

This article reconsiders the Waco event from the perspective of a quarter century. After a brief description

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of the tragedy and *Spectrum's* initial coverage, I will review recent scholarly studies and media treatment of the event. In particular, I will consider the wars between different worlds that continue twenty-five years after Waco: specifically the war between pro-government and anti-government groups, and the war between literalistic and literary ways of reading the Bible.³ The vast majority of those who perished in the flames had been at one time members of the Seventh-day Adventist church and at the time they died, many of them still thought of themselves as Adventists.³ Would Adventism today respond differently to a raid and siege of a group of Branch Davidians in some remote location in America?

The Tragedy

During the spring of 1993, as I was gathering the necessary materials for applying to graduate schools, the Waco tragedy was still very fresh in my mind and it sharpened a growing interest in doing interdisciplinary work in New Testament studies and ethics. On April 19, 1993, after the flames engulfing the Mount Carmel Center ceased, seventy-six people, including twenty-three children, were dead. Along with hundreds of thousands of television viewers, I watched the inferno as I had watched the preceding standoff between government agents and those inside the Center. The disturbing images were heart breaking. After fifty-one days the conflict was over.⁴ But was there any “victory”? The cost had been huge.

The next month, an issue of *Spectrum* contained a large special section devoted to “Ranch Apocalypse.” In his editorial introducing the special section—“We Didn’t Start the Fire But the Tinder Was Ours”—Roy Branson included a note about the launch of a new popular independent journal called *Adventist Today*, whose very first issue was devoted to Waco.⁵ In preparation for our class discussion, my students read the *Spectrum* articles and wrote at least one question they wished they could ask the author(s) of each article. They also received copies of the

first issue of *Adventist Today*. Their questions and the class discussion provided new insights and perspectives on this tragedy. For example, some students who read these pieces in the context of the recent #MeToo and Time’s Up movements, wondered why Adventists did not act years earlier when David Koresh (then Vernon Howell) first exhibited his unhealthy attraction to young girls? One said, “forget [arguing about] disfel-lowshipping him; he should have been jailed.”

How do we think differently about Waco in 2018? In the mid-1990s I wrote that “After 51 days the war between two very different worlds was over.” It seemed true. The government agents and law-enforcement officers were still standing; Mount Carmel and its occupants were ashes. But in another sense, the war between the two very different worlds was anything but over. The smoldering ashes of Waco would continue to flare at times into yet more intensified wars and on various fronts.

The War Between Pro-Government and Anti-Government Groups

Public interest in the tragedy remains high—particularly at this quarter-century waymark. Although at the time of the siege and immediately after the fire, most media depictions of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians were harshly critical, recent portrayals have been more sympathetic. And there have been numerous media attempts at review. For example, during this twenty-fifth anniversary, a made-for-television, six-week series called “Waco” has aired on Paramount Network (beginning January 24, 2018 and concluding on February 28, 2018, the exact date of the raid on the Waco compound).⁶ Accompanying the series has been an online companion documentary series “Revelations of Waco” (9–13 minutes each) featuring people who left during the siege or who survived the fire. Especially interesting for Adventist viewers are comments by Clive Doyle (a former Adventist from Australia) and Sheila Martin (whose husband, Wayne Martin, was also a former Adventist). In addition, the

executive producers and writers John Erick Dowdle and Drew Dowdle participate in a “Behind the Story” feature for episodes 2–6. These are 3–5 minutes in length.

I was surprised when the first episode of the Paramount “Waco” series began with footage far from the flat, arid wasteland of Waco, Texas. Instead, viewers were taken into the woods outside of Naples, Idaho and were shown footage of the eleven-day siege at Ruby Ridge (August 21–31, 1992).⁷ While I had not made any connection between Ruby Ridge and Waco back in 1993, others certainly have over the years. I would learn that not only were the same government agencies involved in both standoffs (FBI and ATF), but even some of the same personnel from those agencies. Viewers made connections even as the movie shifted its focus to residents of Mount Carmel as they, too, watched the events at Ruby Ridge. It was a clever way for the cinematographer to cause viewers to identify with the Branch Davidians. We, like them, were all seeing Ruby Ridge unfold before us. Randy and Vicki Weaver had just wanted to be left alone in their remote cabin in northern Idaho. But now, at the hands of US Marshalls and the FBI, Vicki was dead, and so was their fourteen-year-old son, Sammy. As viewers get to

know the people at Mount Carmel, we cannot help but wonder: which of *these* mothers and children will die?

Each episode of the “Waco” TV series continued to nurture audience sympathy for the misunderstood members of the Mount Carmel Center as an undercover agent finds a community of people who love their children and believe in supporting each other. The nurture continues as the ATF is portrayed botching a search warrant that some argue was illegal and the search morphs into an all-out raid. FBI negotiators are shown arriving on scene after the raid to find their conversation partners within the community (primarily Koresh, Steve Schneider, and Wayne Martin) reasonable people just wanting to be left alone (and now to bury their dead). The allegations of abuse of the small children in Waco are not only minimized, they are challenged by the series. FBI negotiators will state that the children released in the first part of the standoff are healthy, normal, well-adjusted children.⁸ Also in the series, the sexual abuse of underage girls by David Koresh is acknowledged but given a neutral spin. Sisters Rachel and Michele Jones, both of whom bore Koresh children, are conflicted, but conclude that he is always loving. This is an extremely disturbing part of the series, especially given

**Left: 1987 mugshot of David Koresh
Right: Taylor Kitsch plays David
Koresh in this year's *Waco* TV series
(Paramount Network)**

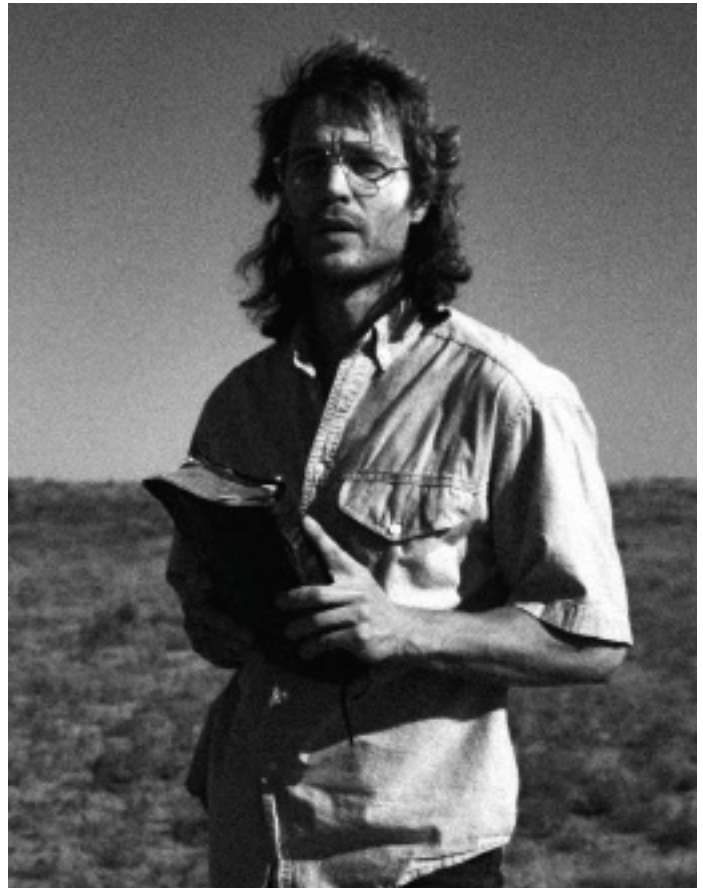
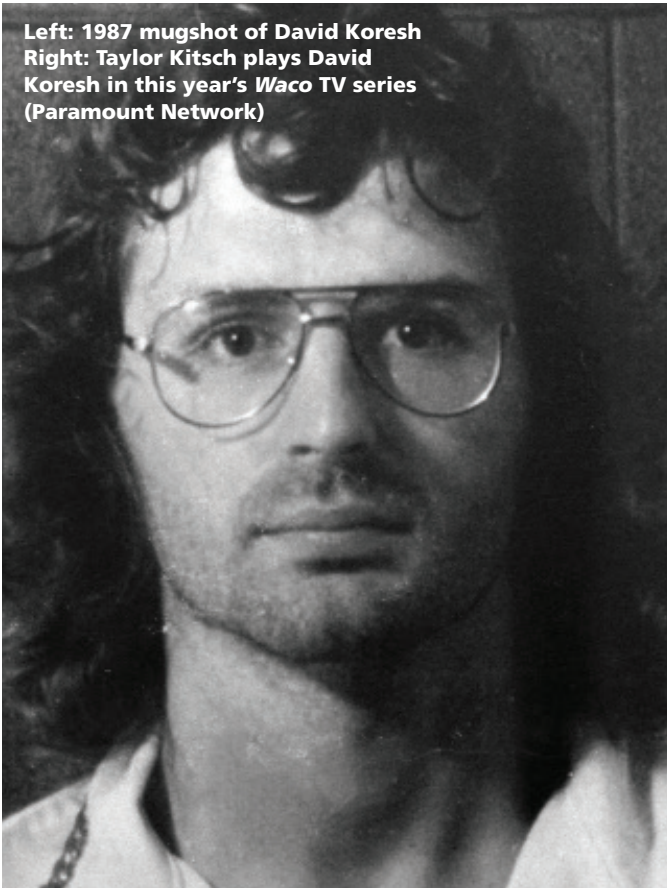


IMAGE SOURCE: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Koresh#/media/File:David_Koresh.jpg, PARAMOUNT NETWORK

the actual testimony of women who left Mount Carmel prior to the standoff who had been sexually abused by Koresh.⁹

Earlier films on Waco described as documentaries include “Waco: The Rules of Engagement” (1997) and “Waco: A New Revelation” (1999). These films, both supported by Second Amendment activist Michael McNulty, set the stage for the 2018 TV series’ sympathetic portrayal.¹⁰ Both of the earlier documentaries suggest that the way the Branch Davidians were demonized in the media was neither accurate nor fair. The point they try to make is that the “unbalanced zealots” were not the Branch Davidians inside the compound, but the vengeful government law enforcement agents outside who were eager to end an embarrassingly botched raid that had left four of their friends dead and sixteen wounded.¹¹ The documentaries suggest that the American people have not been told the whole truth. Questions asked by the documentaries include: Who fired first on February 28? Who set the fire on April 19? Were the child abuse allegations exaggerated in order to get support from the Justice Department for the aggressive actions on April 19? To what degree was the White House involved? To what degree was there a cover-up? Supporting materials drawn from congressional commissions and investigations provide evidence of some poor judgments by the ATF, the FBI HRT (Hostage Rescue Team) and leadership in Washington, DC. The documentary filmmakers suggest that the government is at least partially responsible for the “murder” of the eighty-two people at the Mount Carmel Center who died in 1993.¹²

Those on the anti-government side agree. They take Waco (and Ruby Ridge) as a call to resist the United States government. For them, the Waco community might have embraced an incomprehensible theology, but nevertheless, it was a community of ordinary freedom-loving American citizens. They had been bullied by the government and then murdered for responding to an unprovoked deadly attack on their own property. The attack spawned a range of responses with varying levels of resistance. For some, Waco was the “catalyst” for complex conspiracy theories, and some of the theorists would go on to use Waco to launch their own media careers.¹³ “For people who are on the hard far anti-government right, Waco is the parable—the government is out to get you.”¹⁴ Another kind of extreme response that flared out of the smoldering ashes of Waco resulted in further carnage. This was the decision by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols to seek revenge against the government by detonating a bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on the second anniversary of the Waco fire. On that April 19 day, 168 people (including fifteen children) died. Over 680 people were injured.

Those on the pro-government side of the assessment of the Waco tragedy note that the special council led by Senator John Danforth cleared the government and its law enforcement agents of any wrongdoing (even while identifying poor judgment at times).¹⁵ The council’s fourteen-month investigation included fifty-six lawyers and investigators, and the report cleared Attorney General Janet Reno of any wrongdoing. In addition, the report concluded that no government agents had shot into the



**Left: ATF press conference (Photo: Rod Aydelotte, Waco Tribune-Herald)
Right: ATF agents escort wounded officer Bill Buford from scene of shooting (Waco Tribune-Herald)**



IMAGE SOURCE: WACO TRIBUNE-HERALD. [HTTP://WWW.WACOTRIB.COM/NEWS/BRANCH_DAVIDIANS/YEARS-LATER-WACO-AIMS-PAST-NOTORIETY-THAT-FOLLOWED-BRANCH-DAVIDIAN/ARTICLE_552EA15B-B42D-53E2-902F-2E9507AE3B07.HTML](http://www.wacotrib.com/news/branch_davidians/years-later-waco-aims-past-notoriety-that-followed-branch-davidian/article_552ea15b-b42d-53e2-902f-2e9507ae3b07.html)

building on April 19, nor had they started the fire. David Koresh was deemed to be totally responsible for the fire and the deaths of the seventy-six people at Mount Carmel. That said, the report also noted that had the government been willing to wait for a longer period of time, perhaps the conclusion to the standoff would not have been so deadly.

Twenty-five years after the tragedy, and more than a decade after the commissions and investigations were wrapped up, there remain two warring sides: those who believe that a cover-up had occurred at the highest levels, and those who appreciated the efforts—however flawed—of government law enforcement who had been faced with an unprecedented situation. ABC journalist Terry Moran puts it succinctly: “For some Americans this was a legitimate law enforcement operation...and for others this was an overreaching and violent federal government.”¹⁶

Gary Noesner in his memoir *Stalling for Time*, published in 2010, suggests a helpful middle path as a way forward.¹⁷ One of the earliest FBI negotiators at Waco, Noesner helps us better see the clash of perspectives and assumptions on both sides. Noesner describes Koresh’s fixation on control and power, even as he admits that his own side made mistakes, too. Noesner cautioned his colleagues during the siege that the FBI HRT’s military-type actions contradicted the words and work of the FBI’s negotiators (at times they were working at cross-purposes). For example, the perception of tanks moving onto the Mount Carmel property only reinforced predictions by Koresh that his community would soon be in conflict with evil forces. These were the very ideas FBI negotiators were trying to challenge by gaining the confidence of people inside like Steve Schneider. While deeply critical of some of the tactics of the FBI’s HRT, Noesner lets his readers know that Waco resulted in new policies and approaches to confrontations with groups like Waco, with much more positive results.¹⁸ In “Revelations of Waco,” one of the short online companion

pieces to the six-part TV series, Noesner suggests that the only correct way to look back at Waco is to see it as an American tragedy: a very complex situation where both good and bad decisions were made on both sides.¹⁹

The FBI changed some of their policies and procedures after Waco. Have any Adventist policies changed? Are Adventists more prepared now in our PR departments for moments of crisis management?²⁰ In the 1980s, the Australian denominational response to intense media interest during the Michael and Lindy Chamberlain episode²¹ was not to dissociate from the Chamberlains. Clearly the “regular standing” of the people involved was quite different. But were American Adventists too ready to draw clear lines between themselves and the people in Mount Carmel? Was there an almost collective “holding of the breath” in the hopes that the connections between “them” and “us” would not be made?

The War Between Approaches to Reading Scripture

Following the tragedy in Waco, several Seventh-day Adventist colleges invited me to their campuses to talk with students about “Rescuing Revelation from Waco.” Typically, the campus organized a Friday evening or Sabbath afternoon event, and I met with sometimes dozens, sometimes hundreds of students who had questions about what had happened and why so many young, former Adventists (including college-age students) were among the dead. As we talked candidly together, we considered ways of reading the book of Revelation that would lead to life-affirming interpretations, rather than the deadly kind. I remember spending a lot of time with them in reflecting on the first phrase of the book of Revelation: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” How should that first phrase of the book chart the continuing reading journey?

In 1993, it proved easy as mainstream Adventists to separate ourselves from Waco when it came to Koresh’s ethics—we were all appalled by the allegations of child abuse and sexual

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immorality. Even the buildup of firearms felt foreign to campuses of Adventist students.²² But how were people their own age so vulnerable to Koresh's teachings? As they had learned that Koresh recruited followers from Adventist campuses, they expressed concerns: were they somehow vulnerable, too? Should they just ignore the final book of the Christian canon? Is the book of Revelation just too dangerous to study?²³

While it would be fascinating to ask those same students now—twenty-five years later—how they have reconciled Waco with their reading of the book of Revelation, I was able to ask my current students what their questions and concerns were as we discussed the twelve *Spectrum* articles. I will briefly discuss their reactions to three of the pieces. First, Joel Sandefur wrote "Apocalypse at Diamond Head" after interviewing Pastor Charles Liu on April 8, 1993, just eleven days before the fire.²⁴ The subtitle to his article was "Pastor Charles Liu remembers 14 members leaving his Diamond Head Seventh-day Adventist church in Hawaii." Koresh's preaching and Bible studies in Hawaii in 1986–87 convinced these church members to follow him back to Texas. They left everything—businesses, careers and sometimes even family members—to join Koresh in Waco, Texas. Among the group was a church deacon and Sabbath School leader, Steve Schneider, and his wife who would later become one of Koresh's wives and give birth to his daughter. All three in the Schneider family would die in the fire.

As my students read this interview, they wondered about the Bible studies Koresh gave to Pastor Liu's church members. Why didn't people have the resources to challenge Koresh's theology? (They did not like the idea that there was nothing much one could do in the situation other than forbid them from using the church facility.) Why would people go along with a teacher/preacher who never allowed them to ask questions or have dialogue? They found it difficult to imagine even a very charismatic per-

son having that kind of complete social control today. They were interested in Liu's mentioning that most who went with Koresh were recent converts to Adventism. Was this because they had been more recently exposed to the high drama of end-time events comprising evangelistic meetings? Did they perhaps share a similar social class? And what about Koresh's Ezekiel 9 interpretation? Why would any Adventist be drawn to a group whose theology centered on a mission to call Adventism to repent and to warn its leaders with threats of physical destruction?²⁵

When my students learned that their beloved professor, Charles Teel, had contributed one of the pieces in the *Spectrum* issue, they were eager to read his reflections from 1993 in his article, "Kissing Cousins or Kindred Spirits?"²⁶ They wondered, along with Teel, how a person moves to such a theological place as Waco? Is it, as Teel suggests, when one interprets the book of Revelation—a favorite of Teel's—with a "wooden literalism"? Was it Koresh's approach to interpreting prophetic and apocalyptic literature—an extension of what they saw their evangelists do—that resonated with these Adventists? And, in that sense, were they much closer to us than "kissing cousins"?²⁷

The students seemed to readily identify with Norman Martin, MD, the church member I had interviewed in 1993, whose brother, Wayne Martin (a Harvard-educated lawyer), died in the fire along with three of Norman's teenage nieces and a twenty-year-old nephew (Wayne's four oldest children).²⁸ Students wondered why Wayne and his family were drawn to life in the compound. What did such an educated person find so appealing about Koresh's message? And, most importantly, how did his brother cope emotionally with the tragic loss? Their interest, along with my own curiosity, led me to correspond with Norman, asking if he would be willing to follow-up on our earlier conversation of over two decades ago. I was delighted and grateful that he agreed.

To my inquiry about how he had coped with his loss and how things had changed for him

over the last twenty-five years, Norman replied that as a retired army colonel and a former track athlete, he had “never shed a tear in public before the Waco tragedy.” It was different for him now. Now it was easy to tear-up in certain situations. During certain hymns he finds himself having to stop singing. He also noted that, although twenty-five years ago he blamed his sister-in-law, Sheila, for introducing his brother to Vernon Howell, he now understands that Wayne actually made his own decisions. “This realization was hard for me to digest,” he noted, but his attitude to Sheila had “softened because of this understanding.” Norman still experiences the deep hurt and anger at the loss but has learned to manage these. He finds that during family visits he needs to tactfully steer around discussions of the 144,000 that still consume his sister-in-law.²⁹

As one who remains actively involved in his local Seventh-day Adventist church, Norman Martin’s assessment of the official church’s response to Waco in 1993 is worth noting: “Our world church headquarters reacted with deliberate speed to tell the world that there were no SDA church members [among] the Branch Davidians.” While this might technically have been an “accurate statement” he wondered if “a short second or third sentence would have helped many Adventist families to weather the storm.” He noted that the Branch Davidians had “actively recruited” church members for many years. Acknowledging this “would have helped me to feel that many understood, many were caring, and many knew this full and correct history.” Norman Martin’s insights reiterate the point that Charles Teel made; the people who died in Waco were our brothers and sisters, even if they often did not sound exactly like us.

My students’ questions in 2018 reminded me of similar questions I had considered in my doctoral studies in the late 1990s. In 2002, my dissertation suggested that although Adventists did not recognize Koresh’s ethics, they would recognize something in his approach to biblical

interpretation. My thoughts about his hermeneutics have been confirmed during the past twenty-five years by others who have studied what Koresh actually taught at Mount Carmel and of how he recruited Adventists from churches and colleges. But the new (and surprising) idea for me was that his strange ethical behavior could be perceived by his followers as being consistent with his way of reading the Bible.

From the beginning of the siege, David Koresh used apocalyptic language. He proclaimed that he believed the fifth seal of Revelation 6:9–11, with its forecast of coming martyrdom, had begun.³⁰ It was a simple, plain-reading interpretation. While in the news media at the time we were embarrassed and could not recognize ourselves, in the literature that has been written since then by both scholars and by survivors of the fire, we find that there are numerous other distinctive commonalities. The people living in Mount Carmel were careful in the strict observance of Adventist dietary patterns. They believed in the significance of William Miller’s preaching and the prophetic year of 1844. They kept the seventh-day Sabbath, read the works of Ellen G. White, accepting her as inspired, and believed that God still works through prophetic gifts. They believed that the final judgment was coming on “Babylon” (the United States), and that we are all living in the “last days.” When it came to interpreting the Bible, they believed that one should only read the King James Version and should do so with a plain-reading (literal) approach. This approach gave the members of Mount Carmel, like it gave Adventists, an “exclusive truth” as “God’s true people.”³¹ As religious studies professors James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher point out, “Only through an understanding of Adventist history can one ever hope to accurately comprehend Koresh within a meaningful context.”³²

Kenneth G. C. Newport, former Adventist and currently an Anglican priest and professor of religion at Liverpool Hope University in England, has written several books on the Branch

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Davidians,³³ in which he shows a theological thread going from William Miller to the Seventh-day Adventists to the break-off group Shepherd's Rod to the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists to the Branch Davidians. The thread is "the historicist, premillennial, anti-Catholic reading of Daniel and Revelation." It is the method or approach, suggests Newport, rather than particular content.³⁴ He admits that much of Koresh's message might be strange to Adventist ears, but while "the content was novel, the method well-worn."³⁵ The observations of these scholars are supported by the publicly acknowledged self-understanding of the Waco group.

The memorial at Waco listing the names of the eighty-two people who died from February 28, 1993 to April 19, 1993 also features the names of the "Seven Shepherds of the Advent Movements." The Seven Shepherds are listed as: "Ellen G. White: Founder of Seventh-day Adventist Movement";³⁶ "Alonzo T. Jones: Leader of 1888 Message Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement"; Ellet J. Waggoner: Leader of 1888 Message Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement"; "Victor T. Houteff: Founder of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement"; "Benjamin L. Roden: Founder of Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement"; "Lois E. Roden: Leader of Living Waters Branch – A Division of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement"; and "Vernon Wayne Howell: Founder of the Davidian Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement." (See Fig 1.)

The lineage connection to Seventh-day Adventists is

quite clear. But what about Koresh taking girls barely into their teen years as his "wives"? That's not Adventist! Even the hint of a connection upsets us. Recent memoirs of survivors of the siege and fire give a perspective that, while disturbing, helps us at least to understand the connections they made for themselves—a justification based on a literalistic reading of Scripture so familiar to many Adventists.

Koresh's mother, Bonnie Haldeman, while uncomfortable in discussing the matter in depth, refers to how in the Bible great men of God took multiple wives, and that some were very young.³⁷ Clive Doyle's memoir includes a lengthy discussion of "Branch Davidian Theology," something that Doyle embraced from the age of fifteen when he and his mother were disfellowshipped from their local Adventist church.³⁸ Doyle joined the Mount Carmel community when Ben Roden was its leader, and then saw Vernon Howell as the successor to Roden's wife, Lois. Doyle came to the conviction that David Koresh was a manifestation of God, whose uniqueness was proven by his ability to explain the seals of the book of Revelation.³⁹ Treating the book of Revelation as a detailed chronological timeline of history and the last days, is an extension of the usual Adventist approach. Using this logic, the "Lamb" in Revelation could not be Jesus Christ, in Clive Doyle's reading, for Christ was already with the Father on the Father's throne. The "Lamb" must therefore be a current manifestation of God. He is the one seated as the rider on the four horses (Revelation 6:2–8), he is the seventh angel of Revelation 10 who understands mysteries and is able



The Waco Memorial (Photo: Nick De La Torre, Houston Chronicle)

to open the scroll. He alone can explain it to those who are interested in knowing. The Lamb comes *after* Jesus Christ, and the Lamb is the one who gets married (Revelation 19, 21). The Lamb's children are the twenty-four elders who are born for judgment. This theology, based on a plain literalistic reading, though sounding very stretched, was the basis of the sexual ethics at Mount Carmel. In 1986, Koresh began convincing his community that he should take multiple wives in order to produce children.⁴⁰ By 1989, he was convincing his community that no one else should be having sexual relations with their spouses since they were to be living celibately in these last days, based on a literal reading of Revelation 14:4.

While the vast majority of Adventists would challenge and totally reject Koresh's behavior in taking multiple wives and his goal of producing twenty-four children, some would find themselves embracing the same (if less consistent) literalistic approach to reading biblical passages, including the prophetic and apocalyptic parts of Scripture.⁴¹ Such an approach reads a passage like Ezekiel 9 and assumes that God will soon be violently cleansing the church, starting with the elders. Such an approach reads Nahum 2 and, when seeing the ATF coming up the road as "Babylon," calls those inside the home to "guard the ramparts," "watch the road," "gird your loins," "collect all your strength" (Nahum 2:1). Such readers are told to expect a lot of bloodshed (2:3) as chariots (tanks) race madly through the streets (2:4). They will "hasten to the wall" (2:5) and the palace will tremble (2:6). Such an approach, on this occasion, believed that the teacher/leader who saw all this coming in advance and who was claiming to open the seven seals of God's final revelation must be the Lamb of God. Who else had explained Scripture so clearly to them and done so thorough a "plain reading"?⁴²

Waco may have helped Seventh-day Adventists recognize the importance of reading Scripture literarily rather than literally, by considering a text's historical and literary contexts.

Whether a work was written after the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar or after the fall of Jerusalem to Rome makes a difference; and whether the passage is prose or poetry, narrative or song helps to shape understanding. To what degree have pastors and teachers modified their Revelation seminars since Waco? Do they now seek to ensure an understanding of the ethos of the book and its spiritual message and principles rather than as a guide to a highly detailed order of last day events? When pastors preach on the book of Revelation, they need to ask what is their goal for their parishioners? Is it to help people get the spiritual heart of the book, more than end-time scenarios? How to be faithful in their daily lives? How is the book of Revelation a "revelation of Jesus Christ?" What principalities and powers seek to destroy human life today? Rather than focusing on Sunday laws, should the goal be to help church members identify contemporary coercive beast-like powers that exhibit a preference for deception over truth?

In his *Spectrum* article in May 1993, Ernest Burse asked:

What can we salvage from Waco? The answers reveal yet another standoff—this time within Adventism—a standoff between those who see current events confirming Adventist interpretation of Revelation and those who see events like the Waco holocaust as confirming suspicion over the whole apocalyptic enterprise that has defined Adventism. In simple terms, we're in the midst of a standoff between those who attend Revelation seminars and those who boycott them.

The war between ways of reading Scripture continues twenty-five years after watching on our TVs that some readings are deadly. In the past few weeks, one Seventh-day Adventist pastor told me, reflecting on his preaching of the book of Revelation after the tragedy, "when

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Waco occurred I used it as yet another example (an extreme one) of the kind of interpretation I had warned about.”

Twenty-five years later are Adventists more literalistic or literary in reading and interpreting Scripture? Do Adventists talk about these differences with those who embrace a variety of views? Even after the Adventist Church’s emphasis on *salvation by grace* through faith in the 1980s and 1990s, does Adventist preaching on the book of Revelation continue to suggest “*end times*” by fear?

“Do not be afraid” (Revelation 1:17)

In the twenty-five years since the tragedy, several memoirs have been written by survivors of the raid and the fire. These tend to emphasize the importance of the sense of community that was Mount Carmel: a place where people from various walks of life came for comfort, reassurance and meaning.⁴⁴ It becomes clear that part of what attracted people to this desolate part of Texas was a sense of family, even though the family might have been permeated by fear.⁴⁵ Willing to undergo life without the latest accessories and appliances, the people who came had a real sense of curiosity and commitment to Bible study. They shared food, cramped space, and hard work around the grounds and in the towns nearby. They watched each other’s kids and hoped to keep their children from the superficiality of much of American society.

That people with particular needs sought community is not unusual. But I wonder if the poison in the well from which Branch Davidian community drew its life was their understanding of Ezekiel 9—that theme of violence. Like break-away Adventists before them, the members of Mount Carmel embraced the idea of a separation of the true believers from those who had compromised with the world. When faced with a challenge, they reverted to actions that heightened the separation of people; theirs became a call to cleanse—to violent resistance. “You know, we’re getting an army for God together,” Koresh lectured his followers.⁴⁶ When the “world” arrived at their doorstep what else could they do but resist?⁴⁷ And at least some resorted to violence. When one begins to store up guns, is it inevitable that they will be used? It was a deadly mixture—literalistic readings of Scripture, aggressive law enforcement agents, and a special people called to “cleanse” the temple and to resist Babylon with the modern “swords” of America—automatic weapons.

Joann Vaega was a little girl at Mount Carmel at the time of the raid and siege. She would be one of the twenty-one children who came out during the siege, although her parents would die in the fire. She remembers her childhood in Mount Carmel as being “raised with fear – everywhere is fear.”⁴⁸ Bruce Perry, child psychiatrist who worked with the children who were released during the siege, documented how the children expressed their fear of so many aspects of life. Most of the children were between four and eleven years of age and they quickly made it clear that they had been told that those outside Mount Carmel were dangerous to their well-being and to their parents and friends still inside their home. “When I first met the children,” writes Perry, “they were sitting and eating lunch. As I walked into the room one of the younger children looked up and calmly asked, ‘Are you here to kill us?’ These children did not feel as though they had just been liberated. Instead, because of what they’d been taught about outsiders and because of the violence they’d survived, they felt like hostages.”⁴⁹

Fear seemed to be such a dominant part of the Waco story—nurtured both inside the community, and among the law enforcement agencies outside the perimeter around Mount Carmel. Each group fearful of what the other group would do. If nothing else, the Waco story illustrates how people do horrible things to each other when we are afraid.⁵⁰

But the book of Revelation calls its readers away from fear. Within its very first chapter, the book describes the One like the Son of Man touching a terrified John and saying, “do not be afraid” (1:17). Any version of Adventism that creates fear rather than joy at a God who embraces us, has the mark of Waco Adventism. ■

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Footnotes:

1. I am grateful to the students who participated in this Winter Quarter course (January - March, 2018) and for their helpful insights. They are all completing degrees in the H. M. S. Richards Divinity School at La Sierra University (Riverside, California).

2. Research for this article led me to a study by Patricia Bernstein on an earlier tragedy, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (Texas A & M University Press, 2005). I include it here because of similar themes raised about issues of law enforcement

in an American town, the role of the media, and the ways religious groups defend behavior through particular approaches to their sacred texts.

3. Ronald Lawson, "Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety: Patterns of Diversity within a Sect Reducing Tension with Society," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34:3 (September 1995): 323–341. Lawson believes that the majority of those at Waco maintained their membership at local Seventh-day Adventist Churches (324).

4. This paragraph draws from my published dissertation *Worlds at War, Nations in Song: Dialogic Imagination and Moral Vision in the Hymns of the Book of Revelation* (Wipf & Stock, 2015): 1. In it, I contrast David Koresh's approach to reading apocalyptic literature with approaches that open rather than close down readings and interpretations.

5. The note says: "Although *Adventist Today* has no institutional, financial, or editorial relationship with *Spectrum* or the Association of Adventist Forums, we note with interest the arrival of this bi-monthly periodical of news and opinion. Its first issue is also devoted to Waco. Readers who wish to learn more about *Adventist Today* may look at the advertisement on the mailing wrap." *Spectrum* 23:1 (May, 1993): 2.

6. This six-part series starred Taylor Kitsch (David Koresh), Michael Shannon (Gary Noesner, FBI hostage negotiator), John Leguizamo (Robert Rodriguez, undercover agent), Rory Culkin (David Thibodeau, survivor), Melissa Benoist (Rachel Jones Howell, legal wife of Koresh), Paul Sparks (Steve Schneider), Andrea Riseborough (Judy Schneider), and Demore Barnes (Wayne Martin). It draws, in part, on the book by David Thibodeau: *Waco: A Survivor's Story*, David Thibodeau, Leon Whiteson and Aviva Layton (Hachette Books, 2018; originally published as *A Place Called Waco*, Public Affairs Publishers, 1999).

7. On August 21, 1992, after Randy Weaver failed to appear in court on firearms charges, FBI and US Marshalls confronted Weaver at his home. There followed an exchange of gunfire and an eleven-day siege.

8. This is in contrast to former Davidian Dana Okimoto, who tells that she was told to spank her baby (she had two sons with Koresh) for up to forty-five minutes at a time; actions she deeply regrets. See ABC News Special "Truth & Lies: Waco," which aired January 4, 2018. Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist who examined the children released during the siege would say that these "children lived in a world of fear" (59). See Chapter 3, "Stairway to Heaven," in Perry's work *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog and Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook: What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing*, 3rd ed. (Basic Books, 2017.). Even Bonnie Haldeman, Koresh's mother, who lived with the Branch Davidians from 1985–1991, tells how her oldest grandchild, Cyrus, told her that he wouldn't be allowed to see his grandma if she didn't spank him. So she did so, and he returned to his dad, thrilled that he could now report a spanking by grandma and therefore spend time with her. See *Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother*, edited by Catherine Wessinger (Baylor University Press, 2007), 97. Haldeman

also states: "Those kids all loved David" (99).

9. See Kenneth Samples, et al., *Prophets of the Apocalypse: David Koresh & Other American Messiahs* (Baker Books, 1994), including Appendix B – "Our Lives Were Forever Changed: Interviews with those who personally knew David Koresh" (173–216). See also the account by Kiri Jewell in the ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco."

10. William Gazecki directed the 1997 documentary film with writing and financial backing from McNulty. Jason Van Vleet directed the 1999 film with credit for the screenplay given to Gazecki and McNulty.

11. Roger Ebert used this language when he and Gene Siskel were reviewing the 1997 film. Siskel and Ebert suggest that if the media had used language like "religious group" and "church" rather than "cult" and "compound" there might have been a very different result. They find the people at Mount Carmel "sensible and sincere." And while admitting that it is "an advocacy bit of film making" it also "tries to be fair." See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rsaif8wn15E>. It should be noted that, due to a gag order by the Department of Justice, government officials were not able to participate in these documentaries.

12. Although there are different numbers given for those who died on April 19, 1993, the number of those killed on February 28 is consistent—six members of the community were killed on the day of the initial raid (five during the raid; one, Michael Schroeder, was killed when trying to return to his wife and children the same day, after the initial gunfire). If one goes by the memorial at Waco, in addition to the six killed on February 28, seventy-six people died in the fire, including two unborn or just born (accounts differ) children. Thus, from the perspective of the community, eighty-two members were lost between February 28 and April 19, 1993. When one includes the four ATF agents killed on February 28, a total of eighty-six people died at Mount Carmel between February 28 and April 19, 1993.

13. See observations by "A Current Affair" reporter Mary Garofalo in the ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco." Alex Jones (now of Infowars) sees his roots in Waco, in that it "awakened some of the more revolutionary feelings I've had." Mike Hanson has responded in another way. Rather than create a conspiracy-theory talk show, he has created a museum near the ruins of Mount Carmel, and has been part of the rebuilding of a chapel on the location as a challenge to the government. He calls the actions by the American government "murder and cover-up." And then says, "I'm mad they did this in our name." See ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco."

14. Terry Moran, ABC journalist, ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco."

15. See the "Final Report to the Deputy Attorney General Concerning the 1993 Confrontation at the Mt. Carmel Complex, Waco, Texas" (November 8, 2000).

16. ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco."

17. This work was also used in the making of the six-part TV series. See

Gary Noesner, *Stalling for Time: My Life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator* (Random House, 2000), especially Chapter 7 "Negotiating with the Sinful Messiah," and Chapter 8 "Picking Up the Pieces."

18. See Noesner, Chapter 8 "Picking Up the Pieces." A similar perspective comes through Bruce Perry's reflections on Waco, in *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, 70. Perry reported to his FBI liaison that the children released during the siege and into his care often hinted that further aggression against their home could lead to a violent, even fiery end. While told, the FBI HRT still decided to escalate their aggressive tactics. Perry, 76–77, continues: "Just as the group dynamics within the cult pushed them [members of Mount Carmel] toward their horrific conclusion, so too did the group dynamics within law enforcement. Both groups tragically disregarded input that did not fit their world view." See also Jayne Seminare Docherty, *Learning Lessons from Waco: When the Parties Bring Their Gods to the Negotiation Table* (Syracuse University Press, 2001). It should be noted that thirty-five people (twenty-one children and fourteen adults) came out of Mount Carmel during the first twenty-four days of the standoff. Noesner observes that the negotiations early on were affective.

19. In that same companion piece, Dick DeGuerin, attorney for David Koresh, was asked: "What is the legacy of Waco?" to which he responded, "I hope it's that agencies with the power to use their military equipment only use it when it is absolutely necessary." DeGuerin believes that the fire was an accident, but that federal agents should have anticipated it.

20. Ronald Lawson, "Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety," 328–329, states that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination spent between \$75,000 and \$100,000 on professional media consultants Porter/Novelli. "They thus defined the situation as primarily a public relations problem."

21. In 1980, while camping in the Australian outback with their family, a dingo took the Chamberlains' sleeping baby girl. Lindy Chamberlain would be convicted of murder of her daughter (1982) and would spend over three years in prison before being released (1986) and pardoned (1987) and eventually financially compensated by the Australian government (1992). During the legal struggle and even now in Australia, the Chamberlain case is often associated with the Seventh-day Adventist church.

22. Especially those students who had grown up hearing stories of conscientious objector Desmond Doss. For more on Doss' story, see the 2016 film directed by Mel Gibson, "Hacksaw Ridge," which was based on the 2004 documentary "The Conscientious Objector."

23. Once, in 1994, when visiting for the first time a particular Adventist Church, I was greeted in the foyer by a pastor I had known years earlier in another part of the country. We were delighted to reconnect and he asked me to preach sometime at his church. He then asked me what I was doing graduate work in. When I answered "the book of Revelation," his face fell. "You must not preach about that book," he quickly told me. "Do not even mention it from the pulpit." Stunned (was I in an Adventist Church?),

I asked him why. He responded: "This congregation lost two teenagers to Waco, and it's just too raw. There are too many associations between their loss and the book of Revelation." Koresh regularly used his interpretation of the book of Revelation to recruit young Adventists. Apparently, Koresh even targeted Adventists attending the 1985 General Conference Session in New Orleans. I, too, was present for those meetings, although I don't recall hearing a guy playing his guitar in the parking lot after being denied the opportunity to address the session. See Dick J. Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation* (Simon & Schuster, 1995), 97–98.

24. *Spectrum* 23:1 (May, 1993): 30–33.

25. Since the founding of Davidian Seventh-day Adventism under the leadership of Victor Houteff (1885–1955) a major focus of the faith has been the call to "cleanse the people of God" beginning in the "house of God." Reading Ezekiel in a literalistic way, Davidians have seen their role as warning (and preparing to violently kill) those defiling the temple (Adventism), beginning with the "elders" (leaders and pastors). This is why their mission work is almost exclusively to Adventist churches, camp meetings and educational institutions. When Waco survivor and Branch Davidian, Clive Doyle, was disfellowshipped from his Adventist Church at the age of fifteen, he and his mother, Edna, went to Tasmania to tell Adventists there of the message that they needed to repent in order to avoid the wrath that was coming. They believed that "it just wasn't fair to let the Adventists in Tasmania get killed or go to hell without at least a chance of learning the Davidian message." Clive Doyle, with Catherine Wessinger and Matthew D. Wittmer, *A Journey to Waco: Autobiography of a Branch Davidian* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 22. Doyle also recounts: "Davidians at that time [1950s] and even up to the present day continue to attend Adventist church service on Saturday mornings" (30). And, "Davidians don't get into a lot of baptizing of people from the Adventist church because they've already been baptized" (62).

26. *Spectrum* 23:1 (May, 1993): 48–49.

27. Although at the time of the tragedy few Seventh-day Adventist publications acknowledged the high percentage of former Adventists among Koresh's recruits, there were some exceptions. In addition to Teel's piece, see articles in *Spectrum* 23:1 (May, 1993): Roy Branson, "We Didn't Start the Fire But the Tinder Was Ours," 2; Ernest Bursey, "In a Wild Moment, I Imagine...", 50–52; Douglas Cooper, "Did David Die for Our Sins?," 47–48; Charles Scriven, "Fundamentalism Is a Disease, A Demonic Perversion," 45–46; Ron Warren, "Our Brothers and Our Sisters," 50. In their book *In the Wake of Waco: Why Were Adventists Among the Victims?* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1993), authors Cari Hoyt Haus and Madlyn Lewis Hamblin attempt to answer the question posed in their book's title, but do so without listing their sources or resources.

28. Kendra Haloviak, "One of David's Mighty Men," *Spectrum* 23:1 (May, 1993): 39–42.

29. Wayne and Sheila Martin sent their three youngest children out of

- Mount Carmel during the siege. Sheila then followed. Her husband and four oldest children would die in the fire. With the editorial help of Catherine Wessinger, Sheila has created the work, *When They Were Mine: Memoirs of a Branch Davidian Wife and Mother* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), which includes her early interactions with Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, meeting Wayne Martin who was an active member of his local Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the births of their seven children. Norman has developed a relationship with his brother's two surviving children—Daniel who is now in his early thirties, and Kimberly who is in her late twenties. They were six and four when they left Mount Carmel, along with their eleven-year-old brother Jamie, who passed away in 1998.
30. James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 5.
31. *Ibid.*, 33.
32. *Ibid.*, 43. In a footnote in their book, Tabor and Gallagher note that early life at Mount Carmel was documented by Mary Elizabeth Power in her Master of Arts thesis done at Baylor University in 1940, "A Study of the Seventh-Day Adventist Community, Mount Carmel Center, Waco, Texas." She did interviews with Victor Houteff and most of the community's principals of this period (221).
33. See especially Chapters 7–9 in Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse & Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), and *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
34. Newport, *Apocalypse & Millennium*, 201.
35. *Ibid.*, 214. Newport also explores the typology approach to reading texts, emphasis on the sanctuary, America as Babylon, and the importance of end-time messages being fulfilled in an imminent future. See also the work by professor of urban studies and Seventh-day Adventist, Ronald Lawson, "Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety."
36. While some splinter groups from Adventism leave because of disagreement with the role of Ellen White's writings within the church, this series of splinter groups clearly cherish her works.
37. Haldeman, *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 102–104.
38. See Doyle, Chapter 4, "Branch Davidian Theology." Doyle was disfellowshipped in 1956 for embracing and promoting Branch Davidian theology. An Australian, Doyle and his mother were living near Melbourne, Australia.
39. By April 14, when Koresh's lawyer Dick DeGuerin said that Koresh had told him he would come out of Mount Carmel after he had written his interpretation of the Revelation's seven seals, the FBI HRT did not believe it. They were fed up with Koresh's stalling. However, at the time of the fire, survivor Ruth Riddle carried out a computer disk with the first part of his interpretation. Tabor and Gallagher include Koresh's manuscript in their book (191–203).
40. According to Kenneth Samples, et al., *Prophets of the Apocalypse*, 171, Doyle's oldest daughter Karen became Koresh's first non-legal wife when she was thirteen years old. She never had children with Koresh. And she was not present at Mount Carmel during the raid on February 28, 1993. We know of eighteen children produced by David Koresh. Fourteen died with their mothers (seven of his "wives") in the fire. His first child was born to his girlfriend, Linda, in 1978, prior to David (then Vernon Howell) joining the Branch Davidians. One child was born to his fourth wife, Robyn Bunds, who left Mount Carmel in 1990 with her son. Two sons were born to his sixth wife, Dana Okimoto, who left Mount Carmel in 1991 with her sons.
41. It might be helpful for those not familiar with such approaches to consider the popular book by A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (Simon & Schuster, 2008).
42. Kathy Schroder, who came out of Mount Carmel prior to the fire and who spent three years in prison for her involvement, states in a recent interview: "David Koresh is coming back with God's army and if I'm at the right place and the right time, I'll be gathered up with him." ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco."
43. Ernest Bursley, "In a Wild Moment, I Imagine..." in *Spectrum* 23:1 (May 1993): 50–51.
44. Professor Catherine Wessinger's oral history project with surviving Branch Davidians produced three autobiographies which she edited: Bonnie Haldeman's *Memories of the Branch Davidians* (2007), Sheila Martin's *When They Were Mine* (2009); and Clive Doyle's *A Journey to Waco* (2012).
45. Haldeman says: "we were just like a big old extended family." *Memories of the Branch Davidians*, 88.
46. Sheila Martin, *When They Were Mine*, 37.
47. States Newport, "One should not underestimate the extent to which the arrival of government forces would have enforced upon the minds of the Branch Davidians the view that the eschatological dawn had broken" *The Branch Davidians of Waco*, 228.
48. ABC News Special: "Truth & Lies: Waco."
49. Perry, *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, 64.
50. Radio host Ron Engleman (KGBS in Waco, Texas) gets the final word in the six-week TV series: "We are—all of us, Americans; when did we start seeing each other as the enemy?" In the final stages of writing this article, I watched a trailer for the film "The Great Controversy Ended." Are contemporary attempts to dramatize the book of Revelation or the Great Controversy sending us back to a Waco-like vulnerability? Do such "Left Behind"-type films encourage Adventists who do not believe in the Rapture to also read Revelation in a literalistic way? The entire clip provokes fear. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8Z1R3HKzpk>.