

Remembering the Waco Inferno

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, finance, and politics.

Today's episode is on Remembering the Waco Inferno.

It has been 30 years since the Waco catastrophe and there are many lessons to learn from that disaster. I want to review the facts of the situation, and why the FBI felt that the standoff had gone on for too long and required a military led assault that led to the death of 78 people including 25 kids.

We have three speakers today.

Kevin Cook is the author of the book Waco Rising.

Patrick Allitt who is a Professor of History at Emory University and a scholar in American Religious History.

And we welcome back the What Happens Next film and TV critic Darren Schwartz who is my buddy.

Buckle up because this is going to get crazy.

Let's begin with Kevin's opening six minute remarks.

Kevin Cook:

When I began working on Waco Rising a little over two years ago, I shared the memory of Americans who remember 1993 in Waco. The round the clock news was still relatively new, and this strange event was suited to that wall-to-wall coverage. It began when the ATF still smarting from a botched raid in Ruby Ridge, was looking for a victory in Waco against David Koresh and his Branch Davidians. The Davidians were a fundamentalist Christian sect. I do not like the word cult. Their sect was an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventists.

They were stockpiling weapons. They were converting semi-automatic rifles into automatics. These things were illegal, but do not generally lead to a situation in which the armed might of the US government rolls up your driveway. 76 officers in riot gear pile out of disguised tarpaulins and covered cattle trailers and mount an assault on the compound where the Branch Davidians

lived. That is what happened on February 28th, 1993, and the Branch Davidians shot back. It is not possible, I believe, to say whether the ATF or the Branch Davidians fired the first shot. What is undisputed is that within seconds the fiercest battle by the ATF was underway. It is still second only to Wounded Knee the deadliest action on American soil by American law enforcement to this date.

It resonates 30 years later, because it means so many things to different people. The initial firefight led to a 51-day siege. The FBI took over for the ATF after the first botched raid. It settled into a stalemate that the whole world was watching as the pressure mounted on the Clinton administration. Janet Reno was Bill Clinton's new Attorney General. She had just been sworn into the job.

She was, I believe, misled by the FBI. Janet Reno had made her reputation in Florida a prosecutor against child abuse cases and that was especially important to her. It was therefore no coincidence that the FBI told her that the Branch Davidians were beating babies. There was certainly abuse going on inside. And that is largely since David Koresh, the self-appointed prophet of the Branch Davidians, was a pedophile. He considered girls as young as 12 to be his "wives." As he gained more sway over his followers, he dissolved all the marriages among his followers, told the men they would have to be celibate from then on, because only he would have the duty to create a new generation of followers who would lead the final battle against government forces.

The Adventists believe that the last days are right around the corner. Koresh was remarkable in his knowledge and his ability to weave a coherent story out of the Bible, which is often conflicting, often confusing. He gave his followers a real sense that they were participating in a great drama. They were going to be part of the last days that were coming very soon. And when the US government surrounded their home, their tanks with hundreds of law enforcement officers, it seemed to be to them that Koresh prophecies were coming true.

Rather than wait. The FBI got the go-ahead from Attorney General Janet Reno to use tear gas. They believed that it would flush the hundred or so people inside the compound out. It did not, their faith was so strong that they stayed inside, and that led to the final conflagration that seemed to prove Koresh right to them. It has also led to many resonances that continue to this day, up until last week's first presidential Trump rally in Waco, Texas. That was no coincidence.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about the religiosity of Koresh's followers.

Kevin Cook:

I think the very strength of their faith is what bound them to Koresh and led them to be willing to give up their lives for him, as many of them did on April 19th of 93. I do not share their faith, but I couldn't help being struck by it and moved and impressed by it. It was not understood at all by the law enforcement forces at the time.

Larry Bernstein:

What motivated the ATF choose to go after Koresh?

Kevin Cook:

What led to the original raid was that several of his disgruntled followers who had left Waco and had let the US government know these people are stockpiling weapons.

They are also beating children. There was corporal punishment going on. The idea that they were beating babies, which was what was told to Janet Reno and convinced her to give the go-ahead for the ultimate tear gas attack. That was not true, and one of so many misunderstandings that led to the ultimate conflagration on April 19th of 93.

Larry Bernstein:

The ATF is a federal law enforcement department with limited jurisdiction. Sex and domestic abuse issues were state matters, and the Texas authorities visited the site and chose not to pursue matters. The ATF has jurisdiction over violations of Federal firearm regulations. Why did the ATF send in 76 armed agents in a pre-dawn raid? What happened?

Kevin Cook:

The ATF looked terrible after Ruby Ridge, and there were hearings coming up in Congress about funding for the agency. The ATF was looking for a big win, a big colorful televised event in which they took down these armed crazies outside Waco. And it should have been easy. That is why they went in with riot gear and a great deal of weaponry. They went in these heavily armed ATF agents, two cattle cars rolling up, and they were covered in tarpaulins, so that they hoped that the Davidians would think it is just a rancher who got lost and needed directions.

Then they leap out and advance on the compound and the Davidians fire at them.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that we do not know who fired first, but it seems likely that the firing started when the ATF shot and killed the Davidians' dogs.

Kevin Cook:

There were Malamutes pinned up outside, and one of the agency's plans was to shoot the dogs, to quiet them, to keep them from either causing any trouble or alarming the rest. It might have led to the initial gunfire.

Larry Bernstein:

The ATF raid's success depended on the element of surprise. The ATF wanted to generate favorable press, so they called local TV stations to film the assault. One of the reporters got lost on the way to the raid and asked a local rural mailman for assistance to find the Davidian site at Mt. Carmel and informed the mailman that there was going to be an attack. The mailman was David Koresh's brother-in-law, and he raced back to tell Koresh that the raid was going to happen that morning.

Kevin Cook:

The word got out that the raid was coming. It is often said that those ATF agents on February 28th were going in expecting to have the element of surprise on their side. In fact, they did know that the Davidians had been tipped off.

Larry Bernstein:

The initial raid killed four ATF agents and an equal number of Branch Davidians. The ATF kept firing for hours until they ran out of ammunition. The ATF begged for a ceasefire to care for the injured.

Immediately thereafter, the FBI took over because this was now a case of the death of a federal agent. The FBI negotiators treated this like a hostage situation where somebody has kidnapped individuals, and the FBI want to get the hostages released. The problem was that there were no hostages and the families wanted to stay there and be left alone.

Kevin Cook:

It was an utter misunderstanding of who the Davidians were and what they might do. I think it is the increasing militarization of American police. When you have powerful weapons, it's hard not to use them.

The government labeled this situation erroneously. There were not any hostages they wanted to stay in.

Larry Bernstein:

What about the kids?

Kevin Cook:

You could certainly make the case that some of the children could be considered hostages. They were not of age, but the adults in the compound did not want to leave. They were willing to give their lives and did not want to go out and join the forces of Babylon outside. Rather than a hostage barricade situation that might have been over in several minutes or in hours as happened in Dog Day Afternoon, this thing goes on for weeks and weeks and weeks.

Larry Bernstein:

I think the lesson about Waco was all about time pressure. The FBI lost its patience in the standoff. 51 days was their limit. The FBI felt pressure internally to resolve the problem. The press was filming 24/7. There were hundreds of journalists onsite with daily press conferences. It was a zoo.

Let us get into the FBI decision making process. This was not a case where there were a couple of local yahoo agents making dumb decisions in the field. The head of the FBI orchestrated the final attack on Waco after lengthy meetings with Attorney General Janet Reno who represented civilian authority. There were teams of FBI personnel negotiating when there were no hostages. President Clinton watched and discussed Waco at his press conferences. The Federal Government's best people spent months devising a plan. Why did it fail?

Kevin Cook:

Some of it had to do with the two camps within the FBI. There were the negotiators, the people talking on the phone with Koresh and his followers; they are counseling patience. The watch word is always time is on our side. They wanted to build rapport with Koresh and his followers. Meanwhile, there is the hostage rescue team. These are the tactical people who are more militaristic, whose idea, in the words of their leader on the scene was, "we have got to go in and cut these people's balls off. We've had enough trouble waiting for them." These are the people who down in Panama had to flush Manuel Noriega out of his hideout to bring him to justice by setting up giant speakers outside, blasting crazy noise.

Larry Bernstein:

What did the FBI do to upset the Branch Davidians?

Kevin Cook:

It was an attempt to use psychological warfare against them. The tactical side, which is running out of patience. They are turning search lights on the Davidians to try to keep them from sleeping. They are blasting noise all the time. The sounds of animals being slaughtered. Replaying Nancy Sinatra's song, "These Boots are Made for Walking," as if that would convince them to walk out.

David Thibodeau, one of the Davidian survivors told me, “what sort of theory is this? If you believe that you're surrounding dangerously unbalanced kooks is the thing to do to try to make them crazier?” The negotiating team was vindicated by what happened in Waco, and the tactical team was proved utterly wrong to a deadly level.

Larry Bernstein:

The FBI felt that they were out of time. Why did they feel under the gun? Janet Reno kept asking the FBI, “why now?”

Kevin Cook:

I think the prime lesson is that violence must be the last resort. One reason the FBI convinced itself that the clock was ticking down to zero is that they had psychological experts who, without ever getting anywhere near David Koresh, pronounced him a psychopath and said, “you can't possibly reason with someone like this.” He did not help his cause when he had said, “I will leave my people out if you broadcast my religious views over the Christian Network Radio.” They did that. They were waiting for everyone to come out, and he said, “I've heard from God who told me to wait.”

Larry Bernstein: Koresh first demanded that his sermon be played on the Christian National Radio Network, then he asserted that God said to wait, and finally he proclaimed that God told him to write an essay on the Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation before they gave themselves up. But the FBI lost patience.

Kevin Cook:

FBI officials were telling each other that Koresh was just stalling. He was not really working on his treatise about the seven seals, when in fact he was, and the night before the final raid, they had sent in office equipment. There was a floppy disc. One of the survivors came out. She had it in her pocket with the treatises that he really was working on. More patience might have led to a peaceful resolution. One thing that did come out of the Waco incident was that the negotiators were essentially vindicated. Bill Clinton initially said it is not the government's fault that a bunch of religious fanatics decide to kill themselves. Clinton later thought again as Reno did, we should not have done what we did. We should have waited. There were later incidents in which patience was employed by the FBI negotiators, and it did lead to a peaceful resolution.

Larry Bernstein:

The Federal government has civilian control over the military and law enforcement. The Waco raid had to be approved by the civilian US Attorney General Janet Reno who is presented with the FBI plan. She asks why now; they say because we need to protect the kids from getting beaten. She insists that if there is any risk of injury to the children, then the FBI raid must stop, but in the details of the report it says that if there are any gunshots, then the FBI goes in guns

blazing with tanks. Reno admits later that she did not finish reading the report and chose not to intervene when hostilities began. What happened?

Kevin Cook:

Those are such important points, the division between civilian and military/law enforcement decision making. There is no doubt that Reno, who was new on the job whose heart was in the right place, had an enormous amount of material to try to absorb in this time under enormous pressure. She should have read the fine print. It is also worth noting that the FBI did not shoot back at the Davidians that day. The tanks knocked down the walls and caused them to die from blunt force trauma and suffocation, they were not shooting back.

I think the reason that Reno did not call it off because it began exceedingly early in the morning. Everyone on her end was waiting for the tear gas to work for the people to come running out, because you can't stand the tear gas inside. But these people were desperate to demonstrate their faith, to give their lives if necessary. The adults at least had gas masks because they have been prepared for this assault by the forces of Babylon. That was another thing that they misunderstood that the Davidians would die before they came out.

Larry Bernstein:

At 6 am the tanks roll-in firing tear gas. These are real US Army tanks lent from Fort Hood. The turrets bust through the plywood leaving holes to inject tear gas that later create a wind tunnel perfect for spreading a fire.

Kevin Cook:

Yes, they sure did.

Larry Bernstein:

The FBI is firing tear gas and pyrotechnic charges in a compound that is majority women and young children. All the while, the FBI negotiator is using a bullhorn to inform them that this is not an assault.

Kevin Cook:

It's the most Orwellian moment in the event.

Larry Bernstein:

It's crazy. How did this get into the FBI playbook?

Kevin Cook:

What they meant was we are not going to come in with guns. We are merely going to insert tear gas, which in this case meant knocking down your walls and firing tear gas at point blank range,

at women and children. Then the tanks would back out. There was a vault inside a concrete lined room where there was talk that perhaps Koresh was hiding in there. We are going to go in and make sure that we fire tear gas in there. That is where dozens of mothers and children were. And that is where many of them died. The idea that this is not an assault, is another stark example of how poorly thought out this was. Even though weeks of preparation went into the idea that you could boom through loudspeakers that this is not an assault. You are under arrest, come out with your hands up. And that would influence people as devout in their religion as these people. That was craziness itself.

They did not intend to kill the children that day. They wanted to flush them out with tear gas, but they certainly risked their deaths. That is the culpability of the FBI. The standoff had lasted so long, every day adds to the pressure, makes the FBI, the Clinton administration look silly. The desire to end it overrode the risk and the very clear instructions that she gave: if the children are in danger back off. By the time the children were in danger, the momentum of this operation was so great that it wasn't coming back.

Larry Bernstein:

At dawn, the FBI sent in tanks tearing down the house. They used the tank's turrets to open holes in the building. They fire tear gas at point blank range. Many of the Branch Davidians are injured during the assault as the building collapses onto them. The fire does not start until six hours later. Janet Reno watched the assault on live TV with the American public. The FBI proceeded even though the plan was not working. Why were there no adjustments after things were not proceeding to the plan?

Kevin Cook:

That's another reason why one message of Waco must be against the increasing militarization of law enforcement. Once you have got this weaponry, it's almost against human nature to say, now I'm going to step back. All the momentum becomes, "why do we have it if we're not going to use it?" The risk to the children becomes secondary to the idea of, get this job done. I have some sympathy for the law enforcement officers who were doing their jobs.

Another important message of what happened in Waco is choose your leader carefully, because the government was terribly misled in this instance. And so were the Davidians.

Larry Bernstein:

There were one thousand law enforcement personnel participating in the Waco raid that fateful morning. There were no firefighters or firetrucks. Why had the FBI turned off the water supply?

Kevin Cook:

They turned it off intentionally to make them more uncomfortable inside.

Larry Bernstein: When the fire started, the FBI refused to let the firefighters anywhere near the fire.

Kevin Cook:

These people are heavily armed. And they shot ATF agents before. I think it's worse that the water was never turned on than that the firemen were not sent up, potentially endangering their lives.

Larry Bernstein:

The firemen enter the compound only after everyone was dead. The FBI's first response was to bring down the Branch Davidian flag and raise the ATF flag in its place. Here we have 78 American civilians killed including 25 children and the FBI is tearing up their flag. How did the FBI lose context of the mission's purpose?

Kevin Cook:

I have great sympathy for them, and it's important to remember the loss of life on both sides. That ATF flag went up with the Lone Star flag of Texas, while the embers are still warm, unspent bullets firing off in their rubble. At that time when the flag goes up, a moment of triumph in the minds of some ATF agents that is how angry they were that their fellow agents had been killed on February 28th.

Larry Bernstein:

Mistakes are made. I make mistakes every day and I try to learn from them. There was an FBI and a Congressional investigation. Unfortunately, the FBI destroyed evidence and misled Congress in the investigation. Why did the FBI lie in this matter?

Kevin Cook:

Why does any government agency want to evade responsibility? I think they were worried about further embarrassment. The investigations would have been more effective had there been people other than government friendly investigators involved. The Texas Rangers were on the site, and they were the ones who pushed for more objectivity. Once it was over, the government was terribly slow to say, "we messed up." This was wrong. Nonetheless, they did change their approach to future situations, they did learn a lesson.

And many of the decision makers wound up very quietly retiring, not long after.

Larry Bernstein:

Why was the Waco investigation in the Congress so partisan? Joe Biden was then a US Senator and was Chairman of the Judiciary Committee and he concluded that it was Waco was a mass

suicide. Both Reno and Clinton later admitted that the FBI was at fault. Why was Biden so partisan, does it relate to the fact that the Branch Davidians were so religious and were supporters of gun rights?

Kevin Cook:

I think he and other Democrats were generally trying to soften the difficulty for the Clinton Administration. They did break down in partisan lines. We tend to believe we are horrendously polarized today. We were polarized in 1993. One reason that this event continues to mean so much politically is because it has a great deal to do with the Second Amendment that Koresh and his followers were comfortable with guns, even more so than most Texans. They believed that the government was out to disarm its citizens. And if its citizens resisted, the government was willing to roll off over them and kill them if necessary.

Here is the government seeming to kill Americans on American soil to take their guns away. It comes to represent that. The Gadsden flag, "Don't tread on me flag," is waived on January 6th by people who overran the capitol. Alex Jones took up as a great cause in his first real conspiracy theory was that the government was behind it from the start and wanted to kill all of the Davidians.

Larry Bernstein:

I am not surprised that the Republicans supported a fringe religious group that was pro-gun. What surprises me is that the Democrats defended the use of excessive force by law enforcement when children were involved.

Kevin Cook:

Well, you can pick and choose your symbolism, and that is what makes an event so memorable. That's what makes an even resonate so strongly 30 years later, that you can point to the persecution of sincerely religious people, and you can call it a Second Amendment issue. You can call it a problem with the increasing militarization of the state, of the power of law enforcement to convince civilian leaders to do the wrong thing.

Larry Bernstein:

The Democrats referred to the Branch Davidians a cult. Is that the right word or is it better to describe them as a religious sect?

Kevin Cook:

I resist using the word cult is what Tom Wolfe said, "A cult is a religion with no political power."

It's worth remembering that Christianity was a cult when it began until the Roman Empire adopted it. These people were sincerely religious. If you are an anti-government militia member,

you can certainly point to Waco as proof that the government is against your religion and against your ability to bear arms against what you consider a tyrannical government. If you are to the left of center, it's easy to point to Waco as an example of government power increasing too much over individual rights.

Larry Bernstein:

The mass suicide at Jonestown occurred 15 years prior to Waco. It was a mass suicide by a religious group who had left the US for the South American country Guyana.

The head of the FBI feared a mass suicide at Waco. How much did Jonestown effect the FBI's decision-making process?

Kevin Cook:

I'm glad you brought up Jonestown, because it was very important in terms of the ticking clock. You mentioned before that behind-the-scenes FBI advisors were telling Reno again and again, watch out. We may have a mass suicide on our hands. There was actually an FBI report that floated the idea that we had better watch out for these people because at any minute they might come out and the women will be carrying their babies under one arm and firing at us with automatic weapons with the other. The fear of the mass suicide due to Jonestown.

David Koresh said on the phone again and again, "I'm not going to do that. We are not. We have got too much to look forward to. Because the second coming is right around the corner." They were not going to commit suicide. But that was a factor in the idea that we can't just wait for because Koresh might give the order at any moment. There was one member of the ATF contingent in the very first raid who had a bunch of duct tape with him. His job was to grab Koresh and wrap duct tape around his mouth, so he could not give the word to have everybody kill themselves. That is what they believed might happen even though it was not going to happen. It was yet another misunderstanding of the difference between Koresh and his people and Jim Jones and The People's Temple.

Larry Bernstein:

Netflix released a new documentary on Waco called American Apocalypse. Why is there such continuing public interest in this catastrophe?

Kevin Cook:

Well, it's a life and death story there. And there are a lot of unanswered questions. One of the important factors that many people have a somewhat dim memory of this fire. I thought much of the Netflix documentary was quite good. The documentary presented the drama very well but did not answer a lot of important questions that we've talked about today.

Larry Bernstein:

The public perception of the Branch Davidians was that they were white trash, religious zealots who were armed to the teeth and ready to kill law enforcement and themselves. But that is not completely accurate as the group included many foreigners and a substantial number were black.

Kevin Cook:

That is important because it was a diverse group. They were from Australia, they were from England, they were from Hawaii. They were from the Philippines. They were from all over the world. They shared a belief in the literal truth of the Bible. They were Koresh believers, but they were not white supremacists. Ruby Ridge allowed white supremacists. Waco is more complicated.

Larry Bernstein:

Wayne Martin is one of my favorite individuals in the story. He was an African American Harvard Law School graduate who lived with his family at Mt. Carmel and worked as their lawyer. He dies during the conflagration after making a personal choice to stay. I want to focus on two incidents. The first was on the original ATF attack of the compound. Wayne calls the local sheriff, and he tells him that they are under attack and that there are women and children here and please tell them to stop shooting. The second is moments before his death when he said something like, "God, it's getting awfully hot right now. If you are going to do a miracle, this is really the time to act." Tell me about Wayne Martin?

Kevin Cook:

He's really one of the most memorable people in the story. Wayne Martin was a Seventh Day Adventist whose faith was extremely strong. He believed everything is connected. He took responsibility himself for the fact that that he and Sheila had a child who was disabled. Sheila went out to be with that child as well as their two of their other younger children during the standoff. So, they would have one parent. She left her older children and her husband back inside. When he died, he could see the way out. He could see Clive Doyle and David Thibodeau and Timmy Castillo escaped. There is a way out. Martin died, I believe, for his faith. He chose to stay there to demonstrate the sincerity and the power of his belief in the religion that David Koresh was teaching.

Larry Bernstein:

It's bizarre that we haven't spoken about David Koresh yet <laugh> in the session because he is the leading protagonist. He tells his followers that he is flawed messiah. He discusses his sexual proclivities and his other sinful practices. Tell me about Koresh and his willingness to admit his failings and persuade others to follow him against the evil Babylon.

Kevin Cook:

He called himself a flawed messiah. He thought it made him more relatable that he enjoyed sins, called beer. He enjoyed a cigarette from time to time and his followers could too, but only on the exceedingly rare occasions when he said it was all right. That was part of his manipulation. I believe that it is fair to call him a monster and a predator on young girls who should not have been given to this pedophile by their own parents. At the same time, he was a monster with a sense of humor.

They hooked up a generator and played some songs right back at the FBI. That is a moment that was in very well dramatized in the original Paramount+ TV.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode on a note of optimism. What were the lessons from Waco?

Kevin Cook:

We learned that patience is in order in situations like this. The lesson of Waco is that violence must be a last resort. That time is on our side if we will only talk to each other.

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Larry Bernstein:

Patrick, you taught a series of classes on a history of America religion for the Teaching Company's Great Courses. Why is there such enormous diversity of religions in the US and why is there so much tolerance of it?

Patrick Allitt:

America has given rise to lots of new religions, particularly because of the existence of the First Amendment, which gives everybody the right to worship the way they want. Because religion is intrinsically a volatile activity because it takes on questions of ultimate significance. It's not surprising that the Messianic figures who've led them sometimes become troublesome in the eyes of government. America's an interesting combination of liberty and social conformity. This is one of the points that struck Alexis de Tocqueville that Americans are free on the one hand to do and say what they want. On the other hand, they are almost all exactly the same.

So, when the leader of a new religion says, we've misunderstood what the Bible asks us to do, we should really be doing this. It can cause very severe trouble. The one that springs to mind for me particularly is the Mormons. When Joseph Smith claimed that he'd been appointed by God to revive Christianity, and to make the claim that Jesus had lived in America just after his

resurrection in the Holy Land, his theological claims were scandalous, but his claims that polygamy was biblically justified were even more scandalous. His group was persecuted from place to place. He eventually was lynched, killed, with the connivance of government. And that finally led his successor Brigham Young to take the survivors off into the wilderness, in the hope that by getting beyond the line of settlement, they could have generations of peace. So the Mormons are in some ways, a 19th century precursor of what happened to Waco.

Larry Bernstein:

Sexual behavior at Mt. Carmel in Waco was bizarre and illegal. There was a combination of polygamy and celibacy. David Koresh announced that husbands could not have sex with their wives and must be celibate. The wives could only have sex with David Koresh. He asserted that he didn't do this for his personal enjoyment, but because God told him that he had to reproduce his religious sect. Why did the men participate in this behavior. Some women left but most stayed. Tell us about the role of celibacy and religion?

Patrick Allitt:

Every religion in the world has trouble making rules about sex and trouble with upholding them. When we study comparative religion, one of the most fascinating things is to see how it's dealt with. And it's very common everywhere to discover that the rules are one thing and the observance of the rules is another. But because sex means so much to us, the renunciation of sex is one of the ways in which we can show loyalty to God. An example of this would be Catholic monasticism, and for more than a millennium that's been a mainstream approach to the relationship between religion and sex.

Notably, the Shakers took the view that there shouldn't be any sex at all. That if you have sex, you're carnal.

And what you ought to be concentrating on your spiritual aspect. The amazing thing about the Shakers is that for two centuries, they were able to recruit enough people without reproducing from inside that they could keep the group going. Now we remember it more as a source of distinguished furniture than of spirituality. It started as a religious group about the time of the American Revolution, it took this view that we should renounce sexuality, because there's no better way of showing our fidelity to God.

Larry Bernstein:

Protestant religious sects and their variation began with the earliest settlers in the American colonies. It is why many came to America.

Patrick Allitt:

The two great motives were the pursuit of religious freedom and the pursuit of money. If you think of the early colonists, Virginia was very profit oriented. It was all about making a fortune from tobacco plantations. Although it's true that the New England colonists were in large part motivated by the quest for freedom for religious groups. Most of them were regarded as intolerable by the Church of England, and they regarded their antagonists as equally intolerable.

The religious persecution in America is fairly rare. In the 1600s Quakers in New England were put to death. By the time of the revolution, people of British descent had been in the Americas for 170 years, there were so many different groups, and the founding fathers recognized that attempting to get agreement among all of them about which should be the state religion was far more trouble than it was worth, and that the state ought to make a point of detaching itself from religious questions. Congress should make no law respecting religious establishment. This is in the First Amendment. It doesn't say that the states can't.

So, some of the states did have established churches right up till about 1820. Massachusetts and Connecticut were the last ones to get rid of it. But because Protestantism puts an enormous premium on interpreting the Bible for oneself. Lots of literate people read their bibles and understood them according to differing views. And many then set themselves up as leaders of new groups. If they were sufficiently charismatic that they could attract a following, that was where each of these new sects came from. For most of them, the crucial moment comes when the first generation is dying out, have their children been sufficiently persuaded by the merits of the argument that they stay with it. So lots of religions only survive for one generation, the generation of the founder and the immediate group who surrounded him or her. But the successful minority like Mormons, the Christian Scientists and the Jehovah's Witnesses, are ones which have had a much longer life because generation after generation grew up in the religion and accepted its teachings and passed it on to their children.

Larry Bernstein:

Was it a cult? And what does that word mean to you?

Patrick Allitt:

The word cult by now has got pejorative associations. The word sect is more neutral, and the word religion is more neutral still. To use the word cult instantly implies that you disapprove of it and that you don't belong to it. It's difficult to imagine somebody's saying, "I belong to a cult." Or, they say it after they've become disillusioned and have left. So it may be that some of the people who came out from the Branch Davidians said, "I belong to that cult. It brainwashed me." But then they make the claim that what was so sinister about it was that they lost their capacity to think straight so long as they were a member of it. And the popular understanding of a cult is that it's psychologically manipulative to the point that people stop acting rationally in the ways they

would act had they not become members of it. Especially with the relation to things like sexuality, money, communal activities, ideas about what's ultimately significant.

Larry Bernstein:

The FBI feared mass suicide. Why is mass suicide a risk to a religious sect under distress?

Patrick Allitt:

When we think of the Jewish Rebellion at Masada, we regard its survivor's mass suicide as an honorable act. It's more difficult to imagine that there are people now who think that the Jonestown mass suicide was honorable or sensible in any way. We don't expect that they would've been subjected to hideous punishments had they survived. But I suppose that in the early nineties, it was still only years since the Jonestown mass suicide had taken place. So it's possible that the law enforcement could have talked themselves into the idea that a mass suicide was conceivable, even though they must also have recognized that they were helping to bring it on, cuz it was the pressure they were putting the group under.

As we look at it now, it's a whole succession of tragic disasters. It could have been deescalated far more easily than it was, but of course it's easy to have 20/20 hindsight and much more difficult at the time to keep in perspective your idea of what's likely to happen next. Although we should certainly be clear that religious mass suicide is an extremely rare event in world history.

Larry Bernstein:

The Branch Davidians that did survive the fire said this was not a suicide. That it was a fire started because the FBI's tanks inserted flammable gases and knocked down buildings that started the fire. Koresh had prophesized for years that the government was going to attack them and kill them. Koresh referenced the importance of the Book of Revelation.

Patrick Allitt:

Belief that the end times are close is very common. We've got hundreds of examples of people whose interpretation of the Bible, particularly the Book of Revelation, led them to conclude that they were living in the last days. At the time of the American Revolution, there were some groups whose members predicted that the revolution was an augury of great spiritual events, and that there would be no more death because now Jesus was going to return in glory and that was the end of it. Similarly, in the 1840s, a group called the Millerites led by a man called William Miller. He interpreted the books of prophecy in a way which led him to the exact date, I think it was October 22nd, 1844, in which Jesus was going to return in glory. His believers were so convinced of his rightness that many of them gave away their property and their farms put on white robes, went up the mountain to receive Jesus.

But he didn't come. This event is remembered in Adventist history as the great disappointment. Some of them became disillusioned and left, but others doubled down. Their view was, he might have got the date slightly wrong, but certainly on the important issues, he was absolutely right. He'd convinced his followers that he was trustworthy and that the return of Jesus was imminent.

One of the reasons this keeps happening is that Jesus did say that he was going to return. The New Testament is saturated with the idea of the imminence of the second coming. One of the difficulties in Christian history for more than 2000 years is the way in which the second coming has been delayed and postponed so that now we tend to look back with pitiful condescension on people who thought it was about to happen in the year 100 or 800 or 1500. And yet in our own day, there are still people who have this belief.

If you are told you might be able to read these predictions or these prophecies, but they're actually not going to happen to your generation. It's a disappointing feeling, especially if you believe that Jesus's return will bring history or suffering to an end. It also makes you readier to sacrifice yourself in some great apocalyptic drama like Waco, because you're going to tend to think, we're going to appear in our flesh before God at the day of judgment, which is only a week or two from now. So I think you're that much readier for apocalyptic events.

Larry Bernstein:

Waco was an example of incredible state violence against a religious sect. 75 ATF agents opened fire in the initial gun battle in February 1993 and then 51 days later, the FBI sent in tanks that set fire to the compound killing 76 people including 25 children.

Patrick Allitt:

Organized state violence against a religious group is very unusual in American history, but it's common in the history of many other countries. It's a continuous characteristic of the Islamic world. The unbelievably brutal battles between Sunni and Shiite, and Sufi Islam. And events like the English civil wars of the 1640s, they're saturated with intense religious disagreement. One of the sad aspects of Christianity is that even though Jesus's teachings can be taken as a message of uncompromising peace and love, it's been converted by generations of Christians into a blood thirsty rallying cry for the annihilation of people who don't see it in the same way. American history, although it's got a terrible record of self-inflicted wounds, they mainly have not been religion related. America's history of mutual religious tolerance and acceptance is impressive. Even with groups which push right towards the edge of acceptable behavior, it is possible to go beyond it as the Mormons did, and much more recently the Branch Davidians. But it's unusual.

Larry Bernstein:

During the standoff, the FBI during the press conferences referred to the Branch Davidians as a cult and then justified their aggressive attacks because of pedophilia and polygamy and less on gun violations.

Patrick Allitt:

In the last 30 or 40 years, one of the standard weapons of political groups is to accuse the other side of pedophilia because it's such a powerful way of instantly discrediting them. So it's a great shame that this is one of the accusations made at Waco because it made it less likely that a sensible reconciliation would come about.

This potent brew of mutual fears of pedophilia, of repression and of violence is a powder keg. And the press can always be relied on to stir the pot and make matters worse, because what they want is to see some dramatic action. They want to provoke violent confrontation because it increases their sales. So it's really a perfect storm of mutual misunderstanding and mutual bad faith.

Larry Bernstein:

Can you find any optimism in this catastrophe?

Patrick Allitt:

The note of optimism comes from the widely shared agreement that in future confrontations with unusual religious groups, it behooves everyone to be much more cautious. It is a relief to see that in the 30 years since, it hasn't recurred. There have been plenty of provocative religious extremists who have been eager to draw attention to themselves and have been living in eccentric circumstances. But I'm sure that by now, the law enforcement agencies constantly say to themselves, let's make sure we never again get into a situation like that where we cause unnecessary loss of life.

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Larry Bernstein:

Thank you, Patrick. We are now going to move onto our final speaker Darren Schwartz. Over the past couple of weeks, I watched two documentaries and a dramatic re-enactment series on Waco.

The first documentary was Waco: Rules of Engagement that was released in 1997 that was written and directed by William Gazecki. The documentary highlights the errors made by the ATF, the FBI and the later investigations of the events. The film is shocking, and the government comes out looking terrible.

The more recent documentary Waco: American Apocalypse is much more pro law enforcement. They interview the FBI negotiators, the snipers and an ATF officer who was injured in the original melee. And the interviews with the Branch Davidian survivors are sympathetic but make them look foolish.

The writers of the documentaries have real power over the narrative, who gets interviewed and what gets edited in and out.

In 2018, Paramount released a six-episode dramatic series called Waco.

Historical fiction brings its own set of biases. It also allows for character development and greater psychological analysis and introspection. You're really get to know David Koresh and the battle within the FBI over how to handle the crisis.

The Waco TV drama is incredibly well done and fascinating. Paramount is releasing season 2 for Waco called The Aftermath on April 16.

By watching these three programs, you will get a much richer understanding of the history at Waco. The 1997 documentary explores in much greater detail the government failures, the congressional investigations, and the excessive and gratuitous use of force. American Apocalypse interviews various negotiators, the ATF agents and FBI snipers, as well as the survivors.

But it is the dramatic series that gives a fuller picture of what motivated the Branch Davidians and the conflicts within the FBI about how to proceed to end the standoff.

It is critical to hear multiple sources, evaluate bias, and get different perspectives to appreciate the nuances.

Our next speaker is Darren Schwartz who is a close friend of mine and who is the What Happens Next TV and movie critic. Darren welcome back to the podcast.

Let's begin with some background. Waco was not the first long standoff with the ATF and the FBI. Ruby Ridge came first.

Darren Schwartz:

The impact of the Ruby Ridge incident seemed profound, yet the lessons learned were not remembered. In August 1992, Randy Weaver and his family were raided by the ATF. They shot and killed his dog, his son then his wife. Gary Noesner of the FBI hostage negotiation team

brought in a friendly voice to help alleviate the situation. Bo Gritz was a Vietnam veteran had run for president in 1992.

Although he got less than two tenths of a percent of the vote nationally, he got 10% of the vote in some counties in Idaho. So, to deescalate the situation, he was brought in and was able to get Randy Weaver to surrender. This type of creative problem solving was not used in Waco. Ruby Ridge was seen as a failure by the ATF. So much so that removing funding was being talked about because of this. People believe that the ATFs over exuberance at Waco was to make a big splash.

Larry Bernstein:

I really enjoyed the new Netflix documentary called Waco: American Apocalypse. It included an interview with an FBI sniper who saw Koresh unarmed in the window of Mt. Carmel. The sniper is so talented he could hit a dime from 300 feet. He could have killed Koresh with ease, but he was denied the go-ahead by his superiors. If he had assassinated Koresh, he would have been tried for murder. The sniper says in the documentary that he regrets not killing Koresh to save those kids.

Darren Schwartz:

Do I wish he would've taken that shot? And knowing what we know now, I wish he would've, knowing he would've gone to jail for the rest of his life, he'd been committing a crime, he would've gone circumventing the chain of command. But you kill one guy, and you save the lives of lots of women and children.

Larry Bernstein:

He's an unarmed religious leader who did not shoot or kill anybody. We need snipers in the FBI, but we can't have them going rogue and killing unarmed Americans in a standoff because that would undermine trust in law enforcement in the future.

Polygamy and underage sex is not the responsibility for the ATF. The ATF's mission is to enforce Federal laws related to alcohol, tobacco, and firearms. All sex matters are the responsibility of the Texas police and its social services department. Why were these issues of guns and sex conflated?

Darren Schwartz:

The Texas authorities had been out there, and they'd done their research and they had talked to people. They were known to be stockpiling, manufacturing and retrofitting firearms. The ATF had a right to be there. What they didn't do right, is they didn't approach it from the perspective of, hey, just go knock on the door and talk to him. Koresh gets an overly sympathetic view because of all the failings of law enforcement.

He did bad things to children. But the other side of it is he was a musician and he spoke well, and people liked him. And everyone that interacted at him, no one said he was a raving lunatic, running around committing violence. Why not walk up, knock on the door and say, "Hey man, we got a problem." Instead, they rolled in heavy with 75 heavily armed ATF agents and they didn't expect what they got.

Larry Bernstein:

I am a book reader and prefer to learn by reading books on a subject. I read our previous speaker Kevin Cook's and Jeff Guinn's recent books on Waco. I also watched two documentaries and one dramatic reinterpretation of the Waco standoff. It is interesting that when you read about a place that you create an image of it in your imagination based on the description. But the documentaries provide an actual real image of Mt. Carmel, of David Koresh and the other individuals. Talk about the power of a picture.

Darren Schwartz:

The visual image in this story is so profound. That's one of the few things that I truly remember from 1993. When someone says Waco, the first thing that pops in my head is that inferno. People were inside and they were dying. I remember the building on fire, and I remember Koresh, just what he looked like, young guy, kind of wild flowing hair. The visual aspect in storytelling and in memory is critical.

Larry Bernstein:

In your preparation for this interview, you spoke with a senior member of the Department of Homeland Security, and in that conversation, he said, "ultimately, this is a story of government overreach." What does that mean?

Darren Schwartz:

It's healthy to know that people have different perspectives. Just because someone works for the government doesn't mean that they believe the government. And I know that sounds kind of silly and simple but that's how the country works. There is healthy debate and discourse, and you figure out a way to move forward.

Larry Bernstein:

During the standoff, family members of the Branch Davidians were not allowed to speak to the people inside the Mt. Carmel compound. Earlier you spoke of the creativity of Gary Noesner who was the FBI negotiator at both Ruby Ridge and at Waco when he got Bo Gritz to encourage Randy Weaver to give up. Why was the FBI unwilling to let the families persuade the congregants to end the standoff?

Darren Schwartz:

The FBI was worried about giving them an opportunity to say goodbye because they were worried another Jonestown mass suicide scenario. But you want to let them talk to their family. Yet they drew a hard line on that.

Ruby Ridge was a lesson that they should have learned from, and they had done a few right things, and they turned their back on those lessons.

Larry Bernstein:

Gary Noesner ran the negotiation, but he still thought of the people inside as hostages instead of people who wanted to stay because of their strong religious convictions.

Darren Schwartz:

I think that they were hostages. They just didn't know it. Koresh did some of the traditional mind control things. He made everyone eat the same thing. One week he'd say, you eat bananas and oranges. Then he could say, you can't eat oranges now. You can eat bananas and grapes. The question is, is someone only a hostage if they think they are? There were definitely stories that people were like, "Hey, we don't want to leave. We want to stay." But I think they were brainwashed. They were manipulated by a master manipulator.

Larry Bernstein:

What are you optimistic about, as it relates to the Waco experience?

Darren Schwartz:

30 years later we're able to sit here and talk about it. The information has not been suppressed. And the governmental agencies have hopefully learned from this. That's what hopefully this country's all about, is openness and learning from the past.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to Kevin, Patrick, and Darren for joining us today

If you missed last week's show, check it out. Our guests were Stanford Law Professors Rick Banks and Michael McConnell, and the topic was heckling a Federal Judge at Stanford Law School. The background is that Federal Appellate Judge Duncan was invited by Stanford's Federalist Society to speak at their event, and a mob of Stanford Law Students heckled the Judge and would not allow him to speak. When the Judge asked for assistance from the administrators. Dean Steinbach delivered a six-minute prepared speech in which she questioned whether the juice was worth the squeeze, meaning whether the Judge should make his remarks if his presence on campus is hurtful to some of the Stanford students.

This is a very provocative episode.

I now want to make a plug for next week's show with Emory University History Professor Patrick Allitt who will speak about his upcoming book on the history of the American Railroad.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com.

Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for your continued engagement, good-bye.