

## Negotiating from Within: How the FBI's Own Internal Conflict Impacted Waco

On April 19th, 1993 a family home erupted into flames. Their home - the center of their religion - was invaded by federal government agents looking to protect the greater community at large. No one can imagine the pain this family felt when being investigated by, interrogated by, and invaded by the federal government; but this family was stockpiling weapons, this family was allegedly abusing children, and this family had been labeled as a cult. This family, the Branch Davidians, came into conflict with the federal government, specifically the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and refused to surrender themselves and their property, resulting in major loss of life. The FBI's own internal conflict between the tactical unit and the negotiation team lead to various instances of miscommunication within the Bureau which resulted in resounding tension felt by all agents on the scene. Therefore, the FBI's own internal competition between departments made it impossible to reach a peaceful resolution in the Branch Davidian conflict.

The internal conflict experienced by FBI's tactical unit and negotiation unit is the driving force to why the standoff at Waco ended in a blaze. This is demonstrated through personal accounts of FBI agents – specifically Gary Noesner – who were at the scene of Waco; various government reports, which compared the actions taken at Waco to standardized, crisis negotiation protocol; and an examination of the Lucasville Prison Riots, which occurred simultaneous to the events at Waco. If the tactical team did not act in such an aggressive manner without the negotiation team's knowledge, then it is possible that David Koresh would have sought out a peaceful resolution with the FBI. This hypothetical scenario is reinforced by the interviews, that occurred before acts of aggression, between the FBI and Koresh where it is evident that Koresh was considering exiting the compound. If given the space and time to follow crisis negotiation standards without the impatient tactical team's displays of force, it is plausible

that the negotiation unit could have been successful at finding a peaceful solution. Nonetheless, it is true that the negotiation team often referred to Koresh's rambling as "bible babble." The FBI did not fully understand the religious beliefs and motivations held by the Branch Davidians and therefore, their lack of understanding did contribute to the casualties at Waco. As important as religious understand is, more challenging to the standoff at Waco was the FBI's own internal conflict.

Before analyzing the standoff at Waco, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the events which transpired there. On February 28, 1993, agents from the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) intended to raid the Branch Davidian property to execute an arrest warrant for David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians. But the individuals within the compound were given advanced warning to the plan and were prepared for the agents. The ATF agents were also aware that the Branch Davidians had knowledge of their plan but still decided move forward with the raid. When the ATF agents arrived, a firefight ensued, killing four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians, while injuring many more. A ceasefire was eventually reached. The FBI arrived at the scene shortly after and took control of the situation and maintained control of the situation until the fire on April 19<sup>th</sup> (Wessinger).

The various branches of the FBI were present at Waco, despite working towards the same objective, they were often in disagreement on how to achieve a resolution to the standoff. Within the FBI, the Special Agent in Charge of the San Antonio Office, Jeff Jamar - in conjunction with the Special Agents in Charge of the El Paso Office, Oklahoma City Office, and New Orleans Office - was the most senior FBI official on the scene. Therefore, Jamar, along with his fellow Special Agents in Charge, had final approval over all decisions. Underneath him, within the tactical unit of the FBI was Assistant Special Agent in Charge Richard Rogers. He made all

tactical recommendations at Waco and subsequently carried out all tactical actions at the scene. For example, he is responsible for decisions such as turning off the electrical lines going into the compound. The negotiations unit of the FBI operates differently than the tactical team. Therefore, for the first four weeks of the conflict, Special Agent Gary Noesner was the FBI's Chief of Hostage Negotiation – he acted as a liaison between Jamar, the negotiation team, and the Branch Davidians. For example, he is responsible for the delivery of milk to the Branch Davidians inside the compound. Within the negotiation team, the lead negotiator was Special Agent Byron Sage. Sage is the FBI agent who directly spoke to David Koresh and other members of the Branch Davidians, therefore it was often tasked to him to repair and build trust between the two parties (Noesner). As the FBI worked towards the goal of deolving the crisis at Waco, it began to be revealed that various individuals believed that they knew the most effective way to solve the conflict. Therefore, it became common for the aforementioned individuals to be working in contrast during the incident.

Unlike the FBI, the Branch Davidians were a unified force under the leadership of David Koresh against the threats of the federal government. Not much is known about the personal relationships within the Branch Davidians, outside those involving David Koresh, but what is clear is that all decisions made were approved by him. David Koresh became the leader of the Branch Davidians following the arrest of the previous leader George Roden, who very much disliked Koresh. Still, the Branch Davidians became extremely loyal to Koresh because he refurbished the community when he took power by diversifying their economic reach, rebuilding and updating infrastructure, and encouraging the community to become self-sufficient. In order to increase that loyalty and ensure the security of himself and his compound, Koresh

began to stockpile various weapons. This action raised the alarm of the ATF, and as previously stated is the cause for the initial ATF raid on the Branch Davidian property.

More importantly though, Koresh had a firm grasp on his religion, an amazing sense of charisma, and presented himself as a 'prophet'. Many of his early actions as leader of the religion, were done in order to legitimize himself as the head of the Davidian religion. When he took control of the group, he changed his name from Vernon Howell to David Koresh in order to create ties between himself and King David of the Old Testament. Furthermore, many of his teaching relied heavily on painting himself as the lamb that will release the seven seals from the Book of Revelations (Bromley). Therefore, it is only natural for the Branch Davidians to view him as a prophetic figure because their religion is based deeply upon the seven seals and the Book of Revelations. By employing religious symbolism and appealing to the religious devotion of the Branch Davidians, Koresh quickly and easily gained the trust and loyalty of the Branch Davidian community.

The exchange between Byron Sage, the lead negotiator for the FBI at Waco, and David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidians, demonstrates the consequences of the conflict and lack of communication between the FBI's tactical team and the FBI's negotiation team at Waco. The tactical team had believed that the FBI was wasting their time by trying to communicate with the Branch Davidians through negotiation, but the negotiation team believed they were making progress. Three weeks into the standoff, the tactical team began to use demonstrations of force to coerce those inside the compound to surrender. These displays only caused the Branch Davidians to become more stubborn. The following close reading examines the interview between Sage and Koresh following the first show of force by the tactical team.

It is clear early in the interview that Sage still wants to be able to assist the Branch Davidians when he states, “[W]e’re tryin’ to get this accomplished in your best interest and in ours, but we can only do that if we work together (Frontline).” Here, it is evident that Sage is trying to empathize with Koresh and make him believe that they are working towards the same goal with his use of diction in, “we work together.” These words suggest that both parties want the same thing. This belief is only solidified by his earlier statement, “your best interest and in ours.” By not stating what the interests are, it is up to Koresh to decide what they are, and it implies that the interests are shared. Therefore, by intentionally making the statement broad, Sage never has to say that the FBI and Koresh want the same thing, but Koresh can assume that the FBI and him do truly want the same thing.

Sage utilizes this tactic of establishing common ground by suggesting a common end objective between him, the FBI, and Koresh throughout the interview. He is attempting to do this in order to build and regain trust with Koresh after the tactical team of the FBI placed armored vehicles on the border of the Branch Davidian’s property as a clear sign of force. Prior to this occurrence the negotiation team had made headway with the Branch Davidians. This excerpt from the interview shows the distrust bubbling within Koresh and Sage trying to guide him back:

KORESH: And also, for you too. Hey, the other night your tanks came right up towards the house, is this not a violation of what you promised us yes or no?

SAGE: No. What we...

KORESH: (interrupts) It's not a violation.

SAGE: let me finish. You asked the question, let me give you the response. You to, you asked that we not encroach on your property as long as you were going along with ah, arrangements that we were making in a very healthy and human

fashion on the 28th and the first and the second. That did not happen, and you think about this for a second those tanks did not encroach, and they're not tanks by the way they're armored personnel carriers, in fact one's an ambulance and I pray we never have to use it. (Frontline)

Through his “yes or no” question it is evident that Koresh is extremely troubled by the FBI’s show of force and is unsure whether or not he should be trusting the agents he is currently communicating with. Furthermore, by his interjection, “It’s not a violation,” it is evident that he is angered by this show of force. In Sage’s subsequent response, he points out technicalities in Koresh’s argument in order to present him with reasons to trust the FBI. He cannot deny that the FBI overstepped their bounds on the Branch Davidian’s property, as seen when Sage explains that they approached the camp because Koresh did not hold up his end of the bargain. More importantly though, in order to calm the fears of Koresh, Sage attempts to downplay what Koresh believes to be tanks on the Branch Davidian property. Sage states, “they're not tanks by the way they're armored personnel carriers, in fact one's an ambulance and I pray we never have to use it.” He first is employing logos with Koresh by pointing out the fact that the vehicles creeping onto the property are not tanks but instead “armored personnel carriers.” He does this to decrease Koresh’s fear and to rebuild his trust.

Finally, Sage ends his sentence with an emotional plea, drawing on the common ground he had been building with Koresh in earlier in the conversation. Sage tells Koresh, “one's [of the armored personnel carriers] an ambulance and I pray we never have to use it.” First and foremost, it is important to point out that Sage clarifies that purposes of all the vehicles to demonstrate to Koresh the FBI’s true intentions behind their show of force. More importantly though is the final part of this statement, “I pray we never have to use it.” Sage’s diction is

crucial here; he chooses to employ the word “pray” rather than “hope” or “beg.” He knows that Koresh is a highly religious man who will respond best to religion before anything else therefore by praying, rather than hoping, Sage is trying to increase his chances of reasoning with Koresh.

Furthermore, in this plea to Koresh, Sage uses a non-specific “we,” he never clarifies whether “we” constitutes the FBI, law enforcement in general, or all the parties involved in the standoff – including the Branch Davidians. By using this broad “we,” Sage is hoping that, due to previous statements, Koresh will include himself in the universal “we” and will once more begin to trust and to listen to the FBI negotiation team. In all, this last statement is an emotional plea playing on Koresh’s religion to make him believe the negotiation team and work with them towards a peaceful resolution to the standoff. These samples of interactions between Byron Sage and David Koresh are only a few of hundreds but they demonstrate Sage’s want for a peaceful resolution and the uphill battle faced by the negotiation team when gaining, and ultimately trying to regain, the trust of Koresh and his followers.

Thus far in the academic debate, the consensus has been the FBI’s general lack of understanding in regards to religion, specifically the Branch Davidians’ beliefs, is the reason behind the casualties at Waco. It is undeniable that the belittling of Koresh’s “bible babble” was problematic for the FBI, but even more problematic was the FBI leadership’s inability to reach a consensus on how to approach the issue. Recounts and reports make clear that, “... FBI commanders used tactical methods that undermined the negotiations, and the credibility of the FBI negotiators (Wright, “Anatomy”).” Previous to increased demonstrations of force by the tactical team, Koresh had released twenty-one children; but following the introduction of armored vehicles onto the Branch Davidian property, Koresh became angry and refused to release more children (Noesner). Following this interaction, the relationship between the two

parties rapidly deteriorated, all while the negotiation team desperately continued to seek out a peaceful resolution. Gary Noesner and the rest of the negotiation team in an effort to regain Koresh's trust sent milk into the Branch Davidian compound, but that same night the tactical team turned off the electrical lines going into the property, making it impossible to properly store the milk (Noesner). This is just one example of the tactical and negotiation team working in conflict with one another. But on a larger scale, these actions by the tactical team made it impossible for Koresh to trust those agents he was speaking to and therefore made a peaceful resolution unattainable.

Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish that not only were the tactical unit and negotiation unit working in contrast, but neither team was properly communicating, nor were there even channels in place to allow for easy communication. The negotiation team often felt that the intelligence they were providing was being ignored, while the tactical team often felt that they were being left in the dark. Much of these feelings were because of how those in command communicated; they rarely held meetings between the tactical chief, the negotiation chief, and the Special Agent in Charge, which is where the majority of intelligence was shared (US Department of Justice). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the two branches of the FBI were often working in conflict, due to the fact that both sides felt marginalized by the other. Regardless, if both sides could have communicated with one another, and proper negotiation protocol was then followed, the Waco standoff could have sought a peaceful resolution.

Concurrent to the standoff at Waco was the Lucasville Prison Riots – which unlike Waco, reached a nonviolent end through the use of negotiation, not tactical strategy. At Lucasville on April 11, 1993, 450 inmates rioted took control of Ohio's only maximum-security prison for ten days; the riot resulted in the deaths of nine inmates and one guard. The FBI negotiation team was

called in to assist in the negotiation process. Then Ohio Senator Mike DeWine attributes the quick and peaceful resolution of the riot to the FBI negotiation team. He said that the ability of the FBI negotiators to talk with the inmates and reach a compromise on the list amendments to the Ohio prison system is the only explanation to the short length and the low death toll of the standoff (Wright, "Anatomy"). At Waco, the negotiators attempted to employ these proper crisis negotiation protocol, but they were not given the space nor the time for these tactics to prove themselves useful (McMains). Therefore, based upon the success of the Lucasville Prison Riots, it becomes evident that, without the tactical team's impatience, it is probable that the negotiation team could have reached a peaceful resolution.

Waco was a terrible catastrophe that unfolded underneath the watchful eye of the American media. Therefore, the media influenced the way not only the American public viewed the Branch Davidians but as well as how law enforcement viewed them. The reporters at Waco had little to no sympathy for the Branch Davidians, and their bias revealed itself in their reporting. They painted the Branch Davidians as serial child abusers. The media also reported David Koresh to be a radical fanatic with a cult of brainwashed followers who stocked piled illegal weapons with the goal of doing harm (Hadden). At the base level, these facts are true. The Branch Davidians were stockpiling weapons, there were allegations of child abuse, and Koresh was their leader, but the media twisted these facts into the negative light without any evidence to substantiate their claims (Wessinger).

As a result of biased reporting, the American public began to place pressure on the federal government to find a quick resolution to the standoff and to provide constant updates on the situation. But in order to follow negotiation protocol, time and patience were necessary. Therefore, when providing the media with information it was often not the information they had

hoped for, nor would it be new. Thus, the media, and the US government, began to urge the Special Agents in Charge to resolve the conflict quickly, and in turn the pressure was placed upon the negotiation team. When it became clear that negotiations would take time, the tactical team began to use demonstrations of force to frighten the Branch Davidians into compliance (Hadden). These demonstrations only hurt the ability of the negotiation team to complete the task at hand because the Branch Davidians did not see the FBI as a tactical unit and a negotiation unit both acting separately, but instead as one united entity- as they should be. In the end, the Special Agents in Charge lost faith in the negotiation team to be successful and allowed the tactical team to take the lead in the final two weeks of the conflict (Noesner).

The media had a huge impact on how the American population viewed the situation at Waco, that in turn affected their opinion on how the FBI and other law enforcement officials should resolve the conflict. With the American public having little sympathy towards the Branch Davidians, the US government no longer wanted to continue to fund such a large operation. Consequently, the FBI leadership and tactical team became impatient with the pace of the negotiations. Therefore, increased pressure was placed upon the negotiation team to resolve the conflict; this became one of many sources of conflict between the tactical and negotiation units at Waco that further deteriorated relations between the two.

When analyzing the conversations between the FBI and Koresh, it is impossible to ignore the FBI's apparent lack of information on the religious motivations of the Branch Davidians as well as their general avoidance of the subject all together. The FBI, and US Government, has had a tumultuous relationship with religiously motivated groups, ranging from the Church of God in Christ, the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the Nation of Islam (Johnson). Therefore, it was almost expected that the government's interactions with the Branch Davidians were going to

be problematic – especially when Koresh’s thoughts on religion were labeled as “bible babble” by the FBI (Wessinger). In the following excerpts from an interview between David Koresh and Byron Sage, Sage avoids discussing the topic of religion with Koresh. Previously, Sage had been trying to reestablish rapport with Koresh following an increased use of force by the tactical team, but then Koresh brings up religion. He says, “I didn't say I claimed to serve Jesus Christ, I did not say that, did I? (Frontline)” Koresh is attempting to use religion to explain why he did not exit the compound as it was planned beforehand. To this, Sage is dismissive. He responds explicitly, refusing to engage in a religious discussion. Sage states, “I don't even need to clarify that position because this is not a religious debate (Frontline).” Sage does not believe religion should play a role in his conversations with Koresh, while Koresh’s motivating force in life is his religious convictions. Therefore, by refusing to engage in such conversations, Sage is ignoring an entire segment of Koresh’s identity.

This deflection not a singular occurrence, but instead it happened repeatedly throughout the conversations between Koresh and the FBI. Later in the interview, Koresh once more begins to discuss religion and Sage refuses to participate in any such debate:

KORESH: I know you don't, you don't believe me. You don't even believe that God sits on a throne, you don't believe he gave the book with the lamb, you don't believe the lamb's gonna come with the reward...

SAGE: (unintelligible) tell the truth and (unintelligible) with, with their promises that is not you to this point.. You understand that?

KORESH: I understand that you are trying to make statements for us to comply to your ideals, but here's the thing you just told me you feared God.

SAGE: I do.

KORESH: Which God do you fear?

SAGE: I fear...I'm not gonna get into this debate with you, but I'm gonna tell you that I am personally convinced and secure in my salvation. I don't have to represent that to you one iota. (Frontline)

Once more, Sage refuses share his thoughts on religion with Koresh by stating, "I don't have to represent that to you one iota." He enforces this idea through his use of diction in the phrase, "one iota." This behavior was extremely destructive when attempting to establish a relationship with Koresh because of how important religion was to him. Regardless, it is not nearly as challenging as the internal conflict faced by the FBI. Agents often did not want to involve themselves in religious debates with Koresh because they felt pressured for time and Koresh could easily get off track when discussing religion. Furthermore, the FBI was already establishing a relationship based upon the common goal of a peaceful resolution before Koresh began his "bible babble" (Noesner). Thus, it can be assumed that without the increased impatience and aggression from the tactical branch of the FBI the negotiation team could have reached a nonviolent conclusion to the standoff by building upon the common goal of peace.

Waco is still impacting the FBI long after the fire at the compound has been extinguished. The FBI had been making efforts with the academic community to repair the precedent that had been developed when interacting with religiously motivated communities before Waco. After the conclusion of the standoff, the scholarly community, especially the religious scholars, put distance in between themselves and the federal government in order to preserve the integrity of their research (Weitzman, "Allies"). This obviously negatively impacted the FBI because they lost a resource in training new agents and in creating new policies. Furthermore, Waco forced the FBI to re-evaluate their current protocols and lines of communication in place when faced with

crises, such as Waco (US Department of Justice). The FBI had to remedy the lack of communication between the two branches of their agencies that were ultimately working towards the same objective.

Multiple factors played a role in the disaster at Waco, but the dominating factor was the FBI's own internal disagreement. Government reports and personal accounts from FBI agents confirm that the FBI tactical team and negotiation team were often working in conflict with one another. Therefore, if the tactical and negotiation units could have had a unified plan of action - in other words: have followed negotiation protocol – tragedy could have been avoided. But in the age of increased domestic terrorism, it is crucial to consider, that if the classification of the Branch Davidians as a religious group rather than a militia extremist group influenced the FBI's own manner of communication with the group. Due to the FBI's unwillingness to negotiate with terrorist organizations, it is possible to assume the FBI negotiation team would have been given less power in the conflict and the end result would have been similar (“Domestic Terrorism”). Still, the FBI labelled the Branch Davidians as a religious motivated group in 1993, and then intense internal disagreements followed that amplified the crisis at Waco.

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