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Appropriated Martyrs: The Branch Davidians and the Radical Right

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After the disastrous end of the Waco standoff in 1993, the Branch Davidian dead were idealized as martyrs by many on the radical right, despite the incompatibility between Davidian doctrine and right-wing ideology. This appropriation suggests the importance of martyrologists in identifying martyrs, as well as the increasing malleability of the concept of martyrdom. For martyrdom, as it appears in the right-wing treatment of the Waco affair, departs significantly from classical definitions of what constitutes a martyr.

Keywords Branch Davidians, martyr, radical right, Waco

On April 19 of most years, a few obligatory articles still appear to mark the anniversary of the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing in 1995. However, they rarely mention the other event that took place on April 19, the one that apparently motivated Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols to plan and carry out the Oklahoma City attack. That, of course, was the calamitous end of the Branch Davidian standoff outside Waco, Texas, in 1993.

When the Branch Davidian compound went up in flames, nearly all the sect's members perished, save for nine who got out of the burning compound, 35 who had left during the standoff with the FBI, and a handful who for one reason or another were not at Mt. Carmel, as the compound was known, when the standoff began. Eighty died in the fire, 59 adults (including the sect leader, David Koresh), and 21 children. So much is certain. Whether they were martyrs, however, depends upon whom one asks. It also is shaped by two other factors.

There is, first of all, the question of how and by whom the fire was started. This is bitterly contested. I will return to it, not in order to resolve it, but to suggest the paradoxical way in which it has affected judgments of martyrdom. Second, there is the question of what a martyr is. This would seem relatively simple, since the

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available definitions are remarkably consistent. Scholars and lexicographers understand martyrdom to be an act of fatal religious witness for the purpose of demonstrating one's faith and commitment.¹ The very word comes from the Greek for "witness." To be sure, issues remain in the conceptualization of martyrdom, as, for example, the question of whether it occurs only when one is passively killed for the faith or whether it also takes place when one dies fighting for the faith.² In any case, the connection among commitment, death, and intentional risk-taking remains. However, martyrs are made not only by themselves but also by martyrologists, those who come after and take it upon themselves to describe and characterize the deaths of others. The martyrologists who have interested themselves in the Waco victims have not felt themselves bound by the classical definition.

Of all those who consider the Branch Davidians martyrs, none have been more vocal than members of the far right. These have included not only Timothy McVeigh but libertarians, gun rights advocates, many members of militia groups, and other militantly anti-government organizations.³ That the Davidians should have such champions is particularly strange in light of the fact that, as Jeffrey Kaplan observes, "the beliefs and lifestyle of David Koresh and his followers were utterly inimical to all that the right-wing holds dear."⁴ The community was multi-ethnic and multi-racial, with members from Great Britain, Canada, Australia, Israel, Mexico, Jamaica, the Philippines, and New Zealand. Half of the roughly 130 members were people of color, 45 of them black.⁵ The Davidians felt a strong connection to Israel. Koresh had traveled there in 1985, and he prophesied that his followers would fight on the Israeli side at the Battle of Armageddon.⁶ David Koresh may well have been familiar with right-wing conspiracism through his frequent attendance at gun shows,⁷ but his was decidedly not a group likely to commend itself to racists or anti-Semites. Nor is there any suggestion that Koresh and his followers stood in an adversarial relationship with the government, prior to the events of 1993.

Nonetheless, after April 19, 1993, the Branch Davidians took their place in right-wing martyrology alongside Gordon Kahl, the North Dakota tax protestor shot to death in 1983 after having killed two federal marshals; Robert Mathews, the leader of the white separatist guerrilla group known as The Order, who died in a shootout with the FBI on Whidbey Island, Washington, in 1984; and the wife and son of Randy Weaver, the Idaho Christian Identity survivalist, killed during an armed standoff with the FBI in 1992. Kahl, Mathews, and the Weavers were natural candidates for elevation, but the apolitical, racially integrated Branch Davidians seem decidedly out of place. April 19, 1995, the day McVeigh set off the bomb in Oklahoma City, was the second anniversary of the Waco fire. A commemorative observance was scheduled for the Mt. Carmel site, where the compound once stood. The Texas ceremony was to feature Ramsay Clark, along with journalists, lawyers, and academics interested in the Davidians' cause. However, also on the program were Ralph Turner, spokesperson for the North Texas Constitutional Militia; and James "Bo" Gritz, the former Green Beret who had become a notorious right-wing organizer.⁸

Those in the far-right subculture have glorified the casualties of the Waco fire in terms usually reserved for the hallowed dead of a religion's most devoted believers. To Roy Taylor, a Christian Identity pastor, the Waco dead are "Christian martyrs," killed by the "lackeys" of "Mystery Babylon."⁹ To Shonda Ponder, a frequent web-poster for right-wing causes, "the martyrs of Waco" have awakened the nation to the dangers of gun control and restrictions on religious freedom. "Waco became a door, and a finger of God for the nation."¹⁰

The radical right found it easy to hijack the Mt. Carmel community and engraft its history onto their own. This was made easier by the fact that few people knew much about Branch Davidian doctrine. The community was small and insular before the standoff, an obscure offshoot of Seventh Day Adventism, unknown even to most scholars of religion. Afterwards, the handful of survivors had meager resources and took support where they could find it. When support was offered from the extreme right, they took it. How the linkage was done is less interesting, however, than why. Here two issues intersect: the meaning of “martyr” and the contested accounts of the final fire.

In order for the Branch Davidians to have been martyrs, they would have had to have knowingly placed themselves at risk of death. Indeed, many outsiders thought they had actually done so. According to this scenario, the inhabitants of the compound started the fire to immolate themselves rather than submit to the government. Aside from the impossibility of definitively proving what happened during the compound’s last hours, the mass suicide scenario introduces substantial complexity into the martyrdom question.

In the first place, the question of suicide has been a bitterly divisive issue, since belief in the suicide of the Mt. Carmel members appears to diminish the government’s moral responsibility for their deaths. If they themselves set the fire in order to avoid the consequences of the standoff, then they, rather than the government, bear responsibility. Not surprisingly, the suicide theory has been rejected by surviving Davidians and by many scholars sympathetic to them. Opponents of the suicide theory point to the fact that in a 1992 conversation with a representative of the Texas Children’s Protective Services and in discussions with the FBI during the standoff, David Koresh rejected the possibility of suicide.¹¹ In any case, suicide and martyrdom are not identical. The classical martyr places him/herself in a situation where the enemies of God will make death inevitable, but he/she does not take his or her own life. Making a distinction between suicide and martyrdom has been precisely the problem facing radical Islamic supporters of so-called “suicide bombers,” for they must somehow deal with the Muslim prohibition on suicide while converting the bombers’ deaths into acts of martyrdom.¹² The problem for the suicide theory in the Branch Davidian case is even more formidable, for it assumes that if they had not taken their own lives, they would have been killed by the FBI.

Second, those who deem the Davidians to be martyrs—particularly those on the radical right—also reject the suicide scenario, insisting that the government deliberately set the fire. For them, the Davidians are martyrs *because* the government killed them. They reject the theory that the Davidians started the fire in order to martyr themselves and that, instead, they were the victims of the government’s deliberate attack. They are, in other words, martyrs precisely because they died in a manner that fails to meet the requirements of martyrdom.

This paradoxical conclusion has important implications for an understanding of martyrdom, particularly where political causes are involved. It suggests, first, that the capacity to create martyrs rests not only, or even primarily, with the martyrs themselves but also with the subsequent martyrologists. An individual may deliberately choose to place his or her life at risk to demonstrate fidelity to some cause; and such knowing surrender of life has been at the root of the concept of the martyr. However, the manner in which a death is subsequently seen depends on how it is presented later, and after the moment of martyrdom, the martyr loses control of that process. The process is then driven by writers, organizers, and other symbol manipulators whose agendas may differ from the martyr’s own.

A martyr is not, therefore, simply a creation of an individual who decides to die in a particular way. It is, rather, a persona that needs to be constructed, and at the least requires the cooperation of martyrologists who present the death in the desired way. However, the construction of martyrs places significantly more power in the hands of martyrologists than merely the power to record and transmit stories. For the very meaning of “martyr” turns out to be malleable.

As noted at the outset, there is little controversy among scholars about what a martyr is. That consensus, however, is not shared in American society generally, and many individuals who have not in fact died martyrs’ deaths are nonetheless remembered as though they had. Among those often so designated are Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and the World Trade Center dead. While these represent exceptionally loose applications of the word “martyr,” the term has also been applied less than scrupulously in religious history as well. Ivan Strenski notes that during the Crusades, “popular and non-canonical piety” applied the term much more loosely than Church authorities.¹³ Even so, these were differences at the margins, among individuals and institutions that shared the same moral universe. The same cannot be said of the Branch Davidians and their martyrologists on the right.

Loose designations of “martyr” typically occur in situations of widespread public mourning, either for a celebrated figure or for those who died through the actions of an enemy. Identifying them as “martyrs” elevates their death to an exalted level. However, neither condition was met in the Waco case. The Branch Davidians were virtually unknown outside the Waco area, and the government’s decision to end the standoff on April 19 was widely applauded by the general public. In a subsequent CNN/Gallup poll, fully 93% of respondents blamed David Koresh for the deaths.¹⁴ The surviving Davidians remained largely invisible and had few means by which to affect public perceptions of their deceased coreligionists. Finally, the right-wing groups and individuals who took up the cause of Davidian martyrdom were themselves marginalized. As far apart as the Branch Davidians were from their latter-day champions, the two were joined by common outsider status: the religiously marginal taken up by the politically marginal. The Branch Davidians, stigmatized in the eyes of the general public and unable to control the manner in which they were presented, were thus available to anyone who wished to craft an image.

The image constructed by the radical right is of religionists deliberately attacked and murdered by the federal government. The April 19 events fit into a larger right-wing conviction that a conspiratorial “global elite” is in the process of taking control of the world by imposing a “New World Order.” This world dictatorship would especially target gunowners, and the raid on Mt. Carmel by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms arose out of allegations about gun-law violations. The standoff at Randy Weaver’s Ruby Ridge, Idaho, cabin, which had taken place only a year earlier, had also arisen out of a gun violation. The Weaver family were Christian Identity survivalists who had retreated into the mountains. Not only had Weaver’s wife and son been killed during the standoff, but Weaver’s trial took place at the same time as the Waco siege. In response to Ruby Ridge, the Christian Identity pastor, Peter J. Peters, convened a “meeting of Christian men” in Estes Park, Colorado, in October 1992.

The Estes Park conference occurred only four months before the Waco standoff began. It did not explicitly address martyrdom, but its discussion of Ruby Ridge made imputations of martyrdom natural and established a foundation for the subsequent martyrological treatment of the Branch Davidians. Pastor Peters began his

Introduction to the conference report by quoting Numbers 35:33: "So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are; for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it."¹⁵ The conference participants sent an "Open Letter to [the] Weaver Family" in which they spoke of "Vicki and Samuel [Weaver's] mortal sacrifices . . ."¹⁶ They also clearly believed that more violent episodes were imminent: "A concern of many was the antichrist's forces [sic] attempts to generate an opened [sic] armed confrontation of some sort."¹⁷ The gathering at Estes Park is consequently often regarded as the catalyst for the growth of militia groups in the early 1990s. Finally, the conferees made no secret of their belief that FBI agents had murdered the Weavers. They spoke of "police state tactics" and "genocide."¹⁸

Hence by the time Waco occurred, the leadership stratum of the anti-government right was already preoccupied with killings by government personnel and anticipated more to come. They were already seeking to understand these deaths as part of a religious struggle between the forces of Christ and Antichrist. There were also hints that what mattered were government actions, not the conduct or motivations of the victims. Some at Estes Park advised caution in rising to Weaver's defense on the grounds that he "had a poor reputation as a Christian man." The dominant view, however, was that "reputation was not the issue at hand and that the issue was concerning the government killing of Mr. Weaver's wife and son."¹⁹ This anticipates the right's later lack of interest in the actual beliefs of the Branch Davidians, even though many of those beliefs were contrary to their own. What mattered was the role of the government.

The right's disinterest in Davidian beliefs was matched by their desire to treat the Davidians as passive victims. Many with no extremist associations have questioned the government's view that the compound's inhabitants were responsible for the fatal fire. However, extremists have dramatically extended this position, particularly in two widely circulated films by Linda Thompson, *Waco: The Big Lie* and *II: The Big Lie Continues*. Thompson is an Indianapolis lawyer who has given herself the title of "Acting Adjunct General of the Unorganized Militia of the United States."²⁰ She claims that the ATF agents supposedly shot by the Davidians at the beginning of the standoff were actually executed by the government; that the tanks used by the FBI to insert CS gas into the compound were actually equipped with flamethrowers; and that the government shot survivors as they fled the burning buildings.²¹ For the right, therefore, it was not sufficient to absolve the Davidians of blame for the fire. It was necessary that they be presented as completely uninvolved in their own deaths, in order to transfer complete responsibility to the government. As a result, the constructed martyrs were required to behave in a manner inconsistent with classic concepts of martyrdom.

By implication, then, the right has conflated martyrdom with victimization. By virtue of being victimized, an individual becomes a martyr regardless of his or her behavior or intent. Martyr status is assigned on the basis of the putative evil of the victimizer rather than the chosen self-sacrifice of the victim. In like manner, once the victim has been redefined as a martyr, his or her beliefs cease to be relevant. It does not matter that some, such as Vicki and Samuel Weaver, were ideologically compatible with the extreme right, while those at Waco were not.

Even as this process was unfolding, the anti-government right chose not to take advantage of an opportunity to articulate a more conventional concept of martyrdom. During the Estes Park conference, great attention was given to a paper written by Louis Beam. Beam, who has had long associations with both the Ku Klux Klan

and Christian Identity,²² has acquired a substantial reputation among extremists for his essays on movement strategy. The Estes Park gathering was particularly taken with his essay, “Leaderless Resistance,” which was reprinted in full in the conference report.²³ “Leaderless resistance” stood for an entirely atomistic and non-hierarchical approach to anti-government violence, which was to be undertaken by separate individuals or small coterie acting independently of each other. Beam argued that the pervasiveness of government surveillance and infiltration was so great that organized insurgent activity was too dangerous. Instead, opponents of the “New World Order” needed to take action individually, at times and places of their own choosing, so that violence would be traceable only after the fact.

Beam’s essay dealt with the strategic advantages of the concept, particularly as a defense against government penetration. However, the conference’s so-called “SWAT Committee” (an acronym for “Sacred Warfare Action Tactics”) interpreted leaderless resistance in religious rather than strategic terms: “. . . in light of the Christ being the head (i.e., leader) of His body of believers (Ephesians 1:22, 23) who function individually as members of His body (Eph. 5:30). Such people receiving their orders and instruction from their commander in chief through his word and Holy Spirit. [sic] (Romans 8:14).”²⁴ Thus, they were in effect saying that the individual who appears to commit acts of violence on his own initiative, actually does so at Christ’s command.

Although this was written nearly a decade before 9/11, the resemblance to contemporary examples of Islamic terrorism is striking. There is, however, one important difference: Neither Beam in his essay nor the Estes Park group in their interpretation of it discussed situations in which the user of violence might himself be killed in the attack. Indeed, in none of the Biblical examples cited—such as Moses’ killing of the Egyptian overseer (Exodus 2:12)—had the attacker died.²⁵ The unspoken assumption, both by Beam and by the Estes Park conferees, was that the attackers would survive to use violence another day.

Nonetheless, a different view of martyrdom had appeared almost simultaneously on the radical right, in a text that was to become virtually canonical for white racial separatists: *The Turner Diaries* by Andrew MacDonald (the pseudonym of William Pierce, leader of the National Alliance), a work published in 1980. It was widely publicized in 1995, after it became known that Timothy McVeigh had thought highly of it and might well have been influenced by it. The novel is in the form of the diaries of its eponymous hero, Earl Turner, a member of a quasi-monastic racist organization that seeks to overthrow the government. Turner’s last mission is to detonate a nuclear warhead on his plane as he flies over the Pentagon. Before leaving on the suicide mission, he tells his colleagues, much in the manner of later Islamic suicide bombers, “I offer you my life.” After the racist forces achieve victory, the date of Turner’s mission is celebrated as the “Day of the Martyrs.”²⁶

The Turner Diaries is generally considered the most widely read book on the radical right. Pierce claimed that by 1995, 200,000 copies were in circulation.²⁷ Yet notwithstanding its wide circulation, the concept of martyrdom central to the story seems to have made little headway among its readership. It did nothing to dim the right’s fixation on Waco and its embrace of the Branch Davidians. Appropriation of the Branch Davidians suggests that rightists have paid little attention to the putative martyrs themselves, either in terms of their intentions before death or their beliefs. It mattered only that their deaths could somehow be attributed to the federal government. Thus right-wing martyrology is a parade of diverse and sometimes

incompatible victims, ranging from Robert Mathews, the Odinist racist insurgent, to the Waco dead. Martyrs are identified and honored, but there is almost no advocacy of martyrdom itself. Rather, martyrs are seen as accidental byproducts of conflicts with the state. Individuals may be killed or die defending themselves, but they do not function in the classic manner, as “witnesses.”

Martyrs, in this case, are made by martyrologists, not by themselves. In a world replete with victims—many from groups that have no control over representations of themselves—a reservoir of potential martyrs is always available. Their deaths may be hijacked for whatever cause they seem to serve. Such appropriation was facilitated in this case by an accident of timing. The conflagration at Waco occurred just as the Internet was beginning its extraordinary growth, and the proliferation of far-right websites provided vehicles for views that might otherwise have been accessible only to tiny subcultures. Instead, Waco became the object of a kind of cultic fascination in which the received view of the government and the mass media was met with a counter-narrative glorifying the victims.²⁸ The construction of such martyrs is possible not only because, in the case of the Branch Davidians, they and their survivors are powerless to prevent it, but because “martyr” has become such a flexible concept. Those who operate within religious traditions that have theologies of martyrdom may be constrained by the conventions of those traditions,²⁹ but it is a far freer process for those who operate in relatively unsystematized traditions or, indeed, outside of any historic religious framework. For them, martyrology offers the continual temptation to glorify one’s cause by enveloping it in the halo of the dead who are in no position to protest.

Notes

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5. James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24.

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9. Royal Taylor, “Virtuous Israelite Women: The Song of the Lamb,” <http://www.roytaylorministries.com/am01152.htm> (March 23, 2004).

10. Shunda M. Ponder, “Cornerstone,” <http://www.angelfire.com/wy/1000/cornerstone.html> (March 23, 2004).

11. Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* (see note 5 above), 218.

12. David Cook, “Suicide Attacks or ‘Martyrdom Operations’ in Contemporary Jihad Literature,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6 (October 2002): 7–44.

13. Strenski (see note 2 above), “Sacrifice, Gift. . .,” 11.

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17. "Special Report on the Meeting of Christian Men," 24.
18. "Special Report on the Meeting of Christian Men," 7, 24.
19. "Special Report on the Meeting of Christian Men," 24.
20. "Paranoia as Patriotism: Far-Right Influences on the Militia Movement," The Nizkor Project, <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/orgs/American/adl/paranoia-as-patriotism/Linda-thompson.html> (April 21, 2004).
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22. "The Firebrand," *The Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report* (Summer 2002), 11–21.
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27. Marc Fisher and Phil McCombe, "Going By the Book of Hate," *Washington Post National Weekly* (May 1–7, 1995), 9.
28. MacWilliams (see note 3 above), "Symbolic Resistance in the Waco Tragedy on the Internet."
29. See, for example, David Cook, "Suicide Attacks or 'Martyrdom Operations'..." (see note 12 above).