

Every Bombshell Moment of Netflix's *Waco: American Apocalypse*

Thirty years after the Branch Davidian compound went up in flames, the docuseries *Waco: American Apocalypse* dissects the 51-day standoff between federal agents and cult leader David Koresh.

By NATALIE FINN MAR 23, 2023 5:30 AM TAGS ❤

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Thirty years ago, **David Koresh** predicted Armageddon was coming. As the self-proclaimed second coming of Christ, he also believe he would be resurrected to lead God's army into battle against the forces of darkness.

That second part never materialized, but the end did come for him and 81 others who remained inside the Branch Davidians' Waco-area compound when it burned to the ground

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tnat erupted into wnat **Chris Wnitcomb**, a sniper with the FBI Hostage Rescue Team, describes in a new Netflix docuseries as "apocalyptic carnage."

Whitcomb and others who played key roles in the operation shared their takes on why it ended that way for the three-part *Waco: American Apocalypse*, as did several former members of Koresh's flock who provide insight into just how deep the loyalty to their leader ran.



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The shocking story has been the subject of countless reports and dramatizations, but the Netflix series focuses on the choices made and opportunities missed during the nearly two-month siege. And it's still jaw-dropping madness.

Scroll on for the most intense moments of Waco: American Apocalypse:



Courtesy of Netflix

The First Thing That Went Wrong

On the morning of Feb. 28, 1993, agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) meant to execute a search warrant for illegal weapons at Mount Carmel Center, the sprawling compound the Branch Davidians called home, about 20 miles northeast of Waco. (The breakaway religious sect was founded in 1959 by **Benjamin Roden**, so it was *not* named after leader **David Koresh**, who took over in the 1980s.)

But, as recalled by KWTX News reporter **John McLemore** in Netflix's *Waco: American Apocalypse*, a news photographer on his way to the site asked a mailman for directions to the compound, explaining that it was about to get raided.

The mailman was **David Jones**, a member of Koresh's group. His daughter **Heather Jones** remembers him hightailing it back to Mount Carmel to warn them.



Courtesy of Netflix

Going in Anyway

ATF Agent **Robert Rodriguez** was undercover inside the compound, however, and he later **testified before Congress** that as soon as he found out Koresh had been tipped off—"He turns to me and says: 'They're coming, Robert. The time has come,'" the agent recalled—he made up an excuse to leave and went right to the ATF command post to warn that the Davidians were onto them.

Bill Buford, an ATF special agent who participated in the raid, recalls in the series thinking they should abort the whole mission, that "if we've lost the element of surprise, we can't go."

But Buford says they were ordered to move in anyway. "Just before we got out of the trailers, one of the guys at the front reached back and squeezed the guy behind him's hand," he says, "and that went all through the trailer, we were squeezing each other's hands as we went in."

Buford and fellow ATF Special Agent Jim Cavanaugh recall Koresh coming outside to tell the

feds to get off the property before going back inside. Then, the shooting began. And 30 years later, the finger-pointing over who fired first continues.

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Courtesy of Netflix

Guns Ablaze

"All hell breaks loose, gunfire like you wouldn't believe," McLemore recalls.

David Thibodeau, a former Koresh follower whose book *Waco: A Survivor's Story* inspired the **2018 limited series** *Waco*, maintains in *American Apocalypse* that ATF opened fire at them unprovoked.

"It definitely was not us who shot first," counters Buford, "'cause I remember the first rounds I heard were the M60 and the 50-caliber [machine guns]. We didn't have any of those weapons, so I knew we were in big trouble."

Cavanaugh recalls "a massive, massive amount of gunfire," noting that he heard one of the agents say, "'Well, we know the warrant's good.' Because the warrant was for machine

guns."

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Courtesy of Netflix

A Dramatic Rescue

The two sides agreed to stop shooting at each other so that ATF could get to Special Agent **Kenny King**, who had called into the command post to "tell us he was bleeding to death," a tearful Cavanaugh recalls in the series.

King was a Marine veteran, Cavanaugh explains, so "when he's telling you that, you know it's bad. I knew nobody was coming. Who's coming? Not the Army, not Spider-Man. No one was going to ride to your aid, and we're gonna have to solve this and we're gonna have to save his life. And negotiating a ceasefire was the only way out."

Per recordings of phone calls between McLennan County Sheriff's Lieutenant **Larry Lynch** and Koresh, who had also been shot, the respective sides agreed to halt firing so that the agents could get their dead and wounded out of the area.

Rescuers found King and, Cavanaugh says, "we saved him. He had 13 holes in him."



Courtesy of Netflix

A Journalist Becomes Part of the Story

McLemore had been relegated to reporting from the front seat of his news van—until it was needed as an emergency vehicle.

With every ambulance in the county already busy at the scene, the KWTX newsman says he ended up driving some of the wounded agents to the hospital.

He recalls one who'd been shot in the chest and "was in bad shape, bleeding." The agent "looks at me and goes, 'Will you put my wedding ring back on my finger?' And his wedding ring had slipped up over the knuckle, so I pushed it back down, and all I could think about is my wife. I don't know this guy, but that one act of his makes me think, He's probably a really good guy."

McLemore also ended up transporting Special Agent Buford to safety—only the car was already full, so Buford was wrapped in a blanket and laid across the hood, with agents jogging alongside holding him in place. Another agent stood on the running board and



Courtesy of Netflix

The ATF Casualties

Four federal agents were killed on Feb. 28, 1993: **Conway LeBleu**, **Todd McKeehan**, **Robert Williams** and **Steven Willis**.

Buford, who was hit by gunfire in the hip and upper thigh, recalls seeing Williams go down on what happened to be the day before the younger man's 26th birthday: "He was more like a son to me than he was an agent," Buford says. "He was just such a good kid."

"It definitely pisses me off," he says, "'cause we shouldn't have gone that morning. Some of those guys whose hands you squeezed, it was the last time they'd ever have their hand squeezed, 'cause they were killed."

According to ATF, 20 agents were also wounded by bullets or shrapnel, while eight more sustained various other injuries.



Courtesy of Netflix

Children Caught in the Crossfire

Heather Jones was 9 at the time.

Born and raised at the compound, she says in *American Apocalypse* that Koresh was her uncle. (Jones also explains that her mother left the group, unwilling to abide by Koresh's rule that all the married women who lived there cease having sex with their husbands and only have sex with him.)

"It was so loud," she recalls of the shooting on that first day. "I remembered one of David Koresh's wives come running in the room. She had a gun. When she got to the window, she went to open the curtain with the rifle, and then all of a sudden she flew back right beside



Courtesy of Netflix

David Koresh's Youngest Victims

an honor."

Bob Ricks, the FBI Assistant Special Agent in Charge during the standoff, says in the series there was "no doubt that David Koresh had sex with young kids, some as young as 10." (Numerous allegations of child sexual abuse were posthumously made against Koresh in the aftermath of the Waco siege, but he was never arrested or charged with any related crimes.) Jones says she remembers "talking to the other girls that were 10 to maybe 13. They would giggle and laugh about being one of his wives one day and having his kids, how much it was

And according to what Koresh—whose real name was **Vernon Wayne Howell**—passed on to his followers, 12 was the age at which a girl became a woman. He reportedly married wife **Rachel Koresh** (née Jones) when she was 14 and then sometime after claimed to have the

"Deople think that a man having sex with a hunch of underage girls is a crime " Waco

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Jones recalls Koresn spanking ner with a "really big paddle" to punish ner. "It I tensed up ne would put the paddle to my butt, then pull it back again," she says, "and he wouldn't hit me until I was *not* ready for it. And that was almost every day. A lot of people have told me that he was trying to groom me."



Courtesy of Netflix

Heather Jones Witnesses Her Grandfather's Death

Jones' grandfather **Perry Jones** was shot in the stomach on Feb. 28, and she says she remembers hearing him scream from the hallway.

"He kept yelling to be put out of his misery," Thibodeau adds, "and this went on for a long time...a long time.

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tinisnea Perry off."

He was one of five Branch Davidians reported killed during the ATF raid.



Courtesy of Netflix

Two by Two

As was widely reported at the time, Koresh said he would let two children leave the

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Schroeder recalls their mindset at the time being that they weren't saving lives because they only cared about living for God. Letting her four children leave was "the hardest thing I had ever done."

On March 5, day six, Heather Jones ended up being the last of the 21 children released. She recalls speaking to her father for the last time on the phone from Waco's Methodist Children's Home, and in the series she breaks down sobbing as she listens to the recording.



Courtesy of Netflix

The Mighty Men

Schroeder, who was 29 at the time, recalls being one of few Koresh trusted to handle a

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Schroeder was so high up in Koresh's estimation that he considered her to be one of his "Mighty Men." (Thibodeau explained in his book that the term didn't refer to "some inner core of armed guards," but rather could apply to "anyone given strength by faith.")

Schroeder says she only agreed to leave on March 12, 1993—day 13 of the standoff—to be with her youngest child, 3-year-old **Bryan**, her son with fellow follower **Mike Schroeder**. (He was fatally shot by ATF agents who alleged he fired a gun at them, hours after the ceasefire.)

Mother and son were briefly reunited before she was taken into federal custody and Bryan was placed in the care of protective services. (His paternal grandparents were granted custody in October 1993.) While the standoff was ongoing, a judge gave Schroeder's exhusband **William Mabb** custody of their three children, who'd been living with her at the compound.

Schroeder later pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of forcibly resisting arrest and was sentenced to three years in prison.

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Courtesy of Netflix

The Shot Not Taken

Chris Whitcomb, a sniper with the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team (HRT) who was on duty throughout the siege, recalls the moment nearly two weeks in when he didn't shoot Koresh.

Positioned outside the rear of the compound at an outpost dubbed Sierra 2, Whitcomb says in the series that he was startled to all of a sudden see Koresh appear in his crosshairs. "If I pull the trigger, the leader's dead, the kids are safe, they all come out," he recalls thinking. "It's over."

He continues, "There's this weird thing in my brain that says it is the right thing to do. I'll go to jail for the rest of my life but I can save 90 human beings in this moment. Should I have shot him? No. Did I shoot him? No. Do I think about it a lot? Oh, hell yeah I do."



Courtesy of Netflix

The Beginning of the End

As the weeks went by with seemingly no end in sight, the FBI sought approval from then-Attorney General **Janet Reno** to use tear gas to try to smoke the remaining Davidians out. (A **congressional report** later concluded that Reno and other Justice Department officials *were* concerned about the potential for fire but were not fully briefed on the risks if HRT used "pyrotechnic and high explosive ammunition.")

FBI agents are heard in a recording warning Koresh associate **Steve Schneider** that they'll be coming in with tear gas—and Schneider in turn told his fellow Davidians to get their gas masks on.

On April 19, 1993—day 51—agents ordered the holdouts to leave the building, saying over a loudspeaker, "This is not an assault. Do not under any circumstances discharge your

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day, he recalls in the series, "We start to hear the popping sounds of 40-mm rounds shooting into the building. It's not everyday you see a tank come through your front door, and it's an unbelievable experience."



Courtesy of Netflix

Dueling Endings

Meanwhile, FBI Agent Ricks recalls 1,000 rounds being fired at the agents, and "we never fired a single round back."

It wasn't long before Whitcomb, peering through his scope, saw flames. He says, "My first reaction was, 'Holy s--t!'"

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To which Ricks counters, "David Thibodeau is a liar. He knows the truth. Recordings indicated the fires were started by the Davidians."

Lee Hancock, who covered the story for the *Dallas Morning News*, recalls calling up a source at the federal command post and demanding to know what the heck was going on. And she remembers the source telling her, "'I don't know what the f--k is going on, it's not us!'"



Courtesy of Netflix

When the fire started, Whitcomb recalls, "I remember hearing myself say, out loud, 'Well, they've got to come out now.'"

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"I was standing there shoulder to shoulder with this other guy on my team," Whitcomb says. "We're looking at the building...it's an inferno. All of a sudden, a rifle round goes right between our heads. Somebody in that building, as it was burning to the ground, fully engulfed in flames, stayed behind a sniper rifle till the bitter end. And their last act on earth was to try to shoot me in the head. That's commitment."



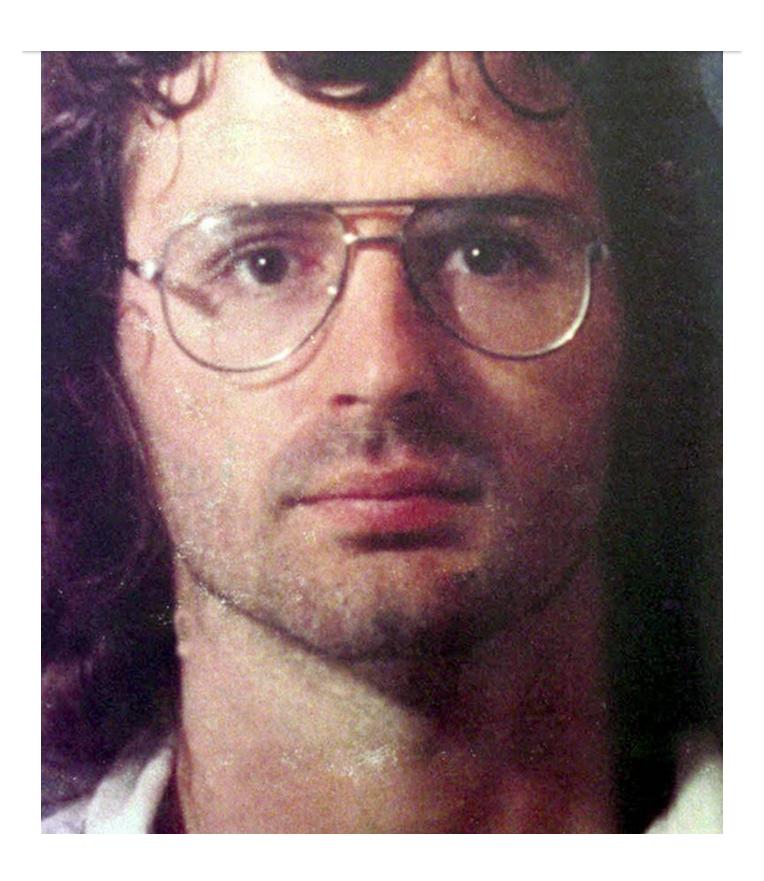
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A Foreboding Presence

One of the countless interested observers who descended on Waco during the standoff was **Timothy McVeigh**, who's seen in news footage selling bumper stickers with antigovernment slogans.

He was executed in 2001 for his role in the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that killed 168 people—two years to the day after Mount Carmel went up in flames.

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In the end, 82 people—including 33-year-old Koresh, his 23-year-old wife Rachel and 22 children—died in the conflagration on April 19, 1993.

"The hostages were not those Davidians in there," Ricks concludes in *American Apocalypse*.

"The hostage in this whole process was the FBI. We had to respond to the demands of David Koresh and we were like actors in his play. He had already written the script. We tried to change the script. We tried to make it have a different ending. In the final analysis, everything rested under the control of David Koresh.

FBI crisis negotiator Noesner agrees that Koresh was "ultimately responsible." But, he adds, "that doesn't mean we didn't make mistakes as an organization, and in Waco we did not save every life we could. Therefore, in my mind, it's a failure."



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