

WHAT WENT WRONG



It needs to be made clear from the outset that this examination will not focus on the individual performances of the four brave men of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms (ATF) who were killed on the morning of 28 February 1993 east of Waco, Texas, nor on the 16 ATF agents who were wounded at the same time. Nor should we cast stones at those ATF agents who were ordered to take part in the unsuccessful assault on the Branch Davidians' compound.

This examination will focus on ATF's assault plan, the execution of the plan and the leadership of the ATF responsible for the conduct of the entire assault effort and failure to accomplish the mission on 28 February. As a "self-appointed expert," to quote ATF Director Stephen Higgins, this writer believes it's prudent and most fitting to hold school on Higgins and his lieutenants for the gross lack of leadership they exercised during the planning and preparation phase, and in the assault phase.

It is apparent that Higgins and his lieutenants have never busted a cap nor smelled the smoke from gunpowder during a conflict with an armed adversary. If they have combat experience, they forgot everything they learned. ATF's failure to accomplish its mission, coupled with the loss of four ATF agents, rests squarely on Higgins' shoulders and he should be held accountable. Had a similar event taken place in the U.S. Army, the responsible party would now be serving time in the correctional facility at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Every principle involved in mounting and conducting a successful raid/assault operation was violated by the leadership of the ATF. The principle of *objective* was not obtainable from the outset. Warrants to arrest certain cult members (David Koresh) and to search for and seize illegal weapons and explosive devices inside the compound were never served. I regret to say it, but there are those on the street who believe that the ATF's objective

on the morning of 28 February was to impress the new secretary of the Treasury Department, to pave part of the way for a larger annual budget.

Building Takedown 101

Anyway you cut it, the ATF failed to accomplish its objective. In addition, *Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence* (commonly referred to as "C³I") are vital to all operations. The commander of the assault force made numerous mistakes in judgment; however, the most blatant one was his inability to examine the assault from start through finish to determine two important factors:

- *The risk to human life within the assault force and to the cult group inside the compound.*
- *Assessment of the assault's probability of success.*

Any commander who is unable to honestly perform the above examination has no business in command. Additionally, any director of a U.S. government agency similar to the ATF should ensure that both the risk and probability of success have been carefully and realistically hammered out. The decision to undertake any assault is based on these two factors.

Of course, there must be a clear understanding of the capabilities of any adversary in order to weld together a viable plan. Intelligence along with intelligence gathering about all aspects of the adversary provide the framework to determine capabilities. A careful examination of capabilities considering weather conditions, training of your own forces, time of the planned assault and security measures are all part of what is called *mission planning*.

ATF needs to adopt a new motto, "P-P-P-P-P-P (Prudent Prior Planning Prevents Piss-Poor Performance)." Had ATF leadership carefully undertaken the steps outlined above, they would not have attempted the assault on 28 February. Also, no com-

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Poor Planning, Bad Tactics Result In Botched Raid

by Col. Charlie Beckwith

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February that the media was put under control and moved outside the target area.

The decision to base the ATF assault force out of Waco prior to the actual assault was totally obtuse. ATF might just as well have run a flag up telling everyone something was about to happen. Also, motel and restaurant employees have big ears. It would have been prudent to base out of Dallas/Fort Worth or even Austin instead of Waco. Waco was much too close to the target area.

Economy of force: The ATF apparently did not take into consideration this principle. The number of personnel involved in the assault force was adequate to storm the compound, had the leadership used different tactics, equipment and not violated basic tactical principles. With respect to *security* and *speed*, the ATF assault force ignored the principle of security and attempted to capitalize on the principle of speed in order to reach and take down the compound.

Of course, the selection of the time for the assault was another gross error in judgment (0900). Successful assault operations are conducted during the hours of darkness or a few minutes before first light.

Personnel within the compound and inside the two-story tower building dominated the entire area, providing excellent fields of fire outside the compound. The ATF were sitting ducks in open terrain with no cover. I am surprised that more agents were not killed and wounded.

I mentioned earlier the principle of *surprise*. This vital principle is normally strengthened and made workable through supportive deceptive measures. There was no deceptive plan in support of the assault force at the time the force conducted its attack on the compound. There are those who are surprised that the Secretary of the Treasury has not placed Higgins and his lieutenants on administrative leave pending the outcome of future investigations.

In summary, the terrible fire which destroyed the Branch Davidians' compound on 19 April would have never happened had the ATF served its warrants and not undertaken an assault which was far beyond the agency's scope.

Some folks are saying the ATF needs to go. They believe the ATF's current functions should be divided between the FBI and the Secret Service. I disagree with this concept and believe we need a viable ATF. On the other hand, I further believe that the current leadership in the ATF must go. The ATF is in serious need of strong, experienced and effective leadership to foster unity among all its agents and to totally reorganize training objectives and operating procedures throughout the entire agency.

Retired U.S. Army Colonel Charlie Beckwith is founder of America's elite Delta Force and a noted authority on raids and assault planning.

mander can be successful if he or she works in a vacuum. He must talk to his subordinate commanders and make sure that every individual involved in the assault understands his task and the tasks of those on his left and right.

Unfortunately this was not the case with the commander of the ATF assault force. A short time before the actual assault, while in the staging area, the commander was made aware of the fact that he had lost the *element of surprise*.

I laugh every time I hear Higgins or one of his lieutenants say, "we lost the *element of surprise*" and "someone informed the cult we were coming." Has Director Higgins never heard of contingency planning? I recall a time in South Vietnam when a group of Special Forces soldiers was only seconds away from assaulting its target, then one of them tripped on a vine and accidentally discharged his weapon. We immediately went to Plan B, a contingency plan, accomplishing our mission without a single casualty.

I cried when I heard that four ATF agents had been killed and 16 wounded in the wake of this poorly thought-out attack and became very angry when I learned that there was no, repeat *no*, medical team or doctor attached to the assault force. It took more than three hours to evacuate personnel.

OPSEC A Joke

Operations Security (OPSEC) can make or break a combat operation. The lack of OPSEC bit the ATF assault force squarely on the ass. The first violation was to conduct a rehearsal at Fort Hood, Texas. Fort Hood is too close to the actual target site. Also, the rehearsal area was not carefully policed nor swept before the assault force departed the area.

The Dallas ATF office invited the media to the Branch Davidian compound, allowing reporters to tag along on the assault and remain in the target area. It was not until the FBI arrived on 29

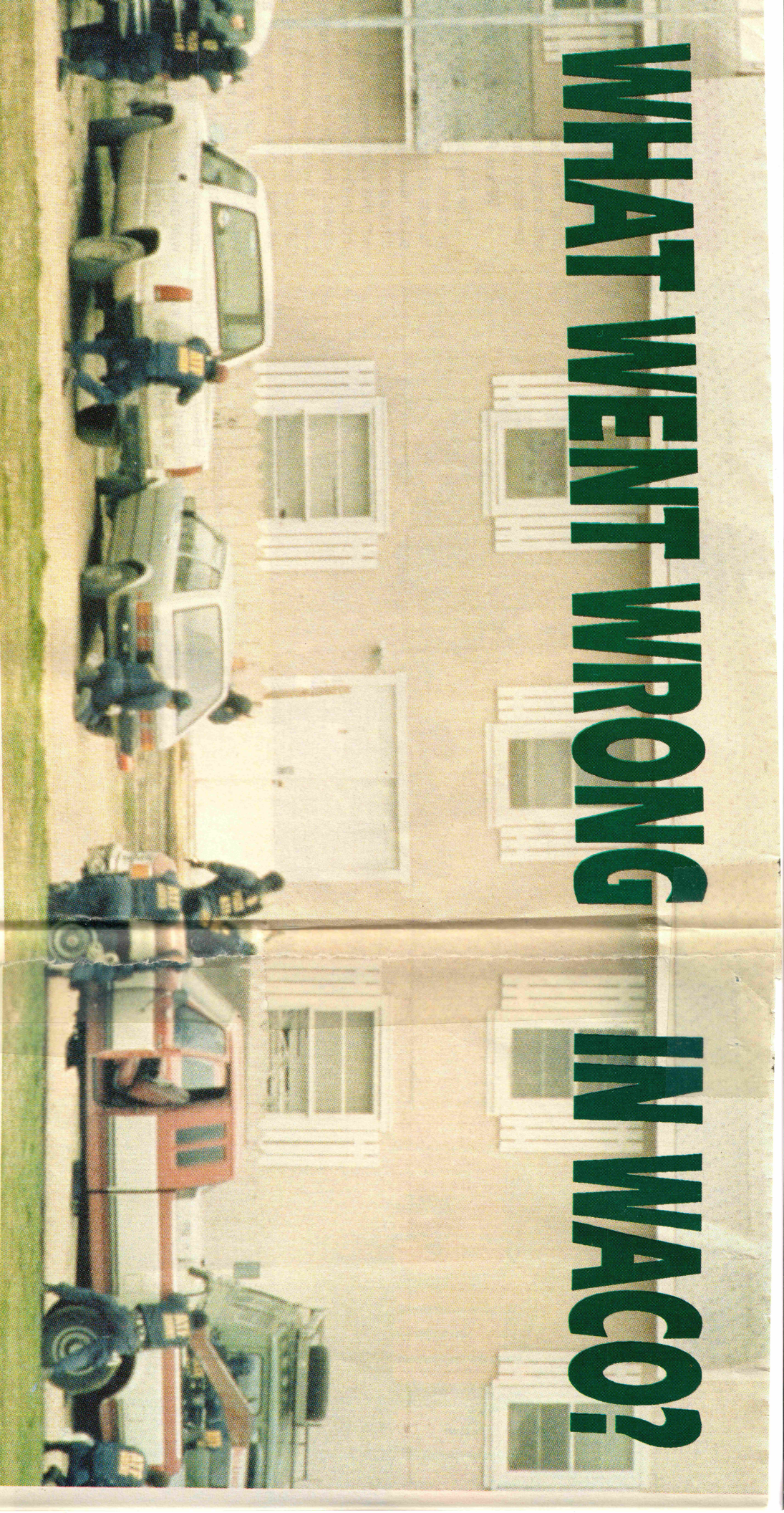
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