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A God that Answers by Fire: The Branch Davidians, New Religious Movements, and White Christian Nationalism

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B.S.
Florida State University
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Thesis Committee Chair: Helen Kim, Ph.D.

An abstract of
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Abstract

A God that Answers by Fire: The Branch Davidians, New Religious Movements, and White Christian Nationalism

By Gaberiel Clements

This thesis examines the apocalyptic worldbuilding of new religious movements by using The Branch Davidians and the Waco Siege as a case study. It uses this case study of Waco to reexamine the events considering the growing influence of white Christian nationalism in the United States to argue that white Christian nationalism exists as a kind of apocalyptic new religious movement. Drawing on the literature of history and sociology of religion and the Branch Davidian archives at Baylor University, the thesis advances the following arguments: The apocalyptic provides new religious movements with a unified worldview that puts them at odds with broader society. Apocalypticism provides new religious movements with a sense of legitimacy, agency, and embattlement that can create conflict when their worldviews are misunderstood and challenged. Finally, it argues that the apocalyptic helps create rage and catalyzes the legitimation of violence among new religious movements. Concluding that understanding the errors of Waco can help us better understand and confront white Christian nationalism.

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Introduction: A Fire Yet Burns

On February 28th, 1993, at around 9:45 a.m., the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) raided a compound in Waco, Texas, that housed the General Association of Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. After the day had concluded, four ATF agents lay dead, with another 16 agents wounded due to a firefight between the Federal Agents and the Branch Davidians. In addition, six Branch Davidians were killed inside the Mount Carmel compound, with 11 wounded. Imperatively amongst the injured was the leader of the Branch Davidians, Vernon Wayne Howell, better known as David Koresh, the subject of the raid and center of the controversy that had engulfed the Branch Davidians. Nevertheless, the events of February 28th would lead to a standoff between federal law enforcement and the Branch Davidians, concluding 51 days later on April 19th, 1993, as a fire swept through the compound, leaving a further seventy-six Branch Davidians dead, including Koresh. In the aftermath of these events, Waco and the Branch Davidians became synonymous with government failure, political overreach, cults, and a symbol of the radical right.

However, another fire yet burns in American politics. White Christian nationalism is a force that could burn down the very foundations of democracy. While the January 6th insurrection is emblematic of this fire that rages in US politics today, white Americans' sense of embattlement in this nation was radically altered on April 19, 1993, in Waco, Texas. Sandwiched between the major cities of Austin and Dallas, Waco was home to around 103,590 people in 1993 and was known perhaps only for being Dr. Pepper's birthplace and Baylor University's home. On February 28, 1993, the small religious group known as the Branch Davidians transformed the town's name from a place to an event, leaving a wound in the American mind. At the center of both fires is the vision of an apocalyptic battle where the forces

of good finally triumph over the forces of evil. This apocalyptic connection is what unites the legacy of Waco to the current political moment and what lies at the heart of this project. The fire of Waco still has the potential to ignite the flames of white Christian nationalism in a way that threatens the United States not only culturally and politically but also religiously.

The Waco siege serves as a powerful case study for understanding the role of American religion and politics. The realities of Waco will likely always be obscured, as many questions will always remain, such as which party shot first, who started the fire, or even the level of abuse present in a compound that became ranch apocalypse. However, even thirty years after the events, Waco holds a place in the American imagination as a specter, haunting politics and religion. One can become lost in two competing stories by examining the varieties of narratives that emerged from the aftermath of Waco. The first portrays Federal Law Enforcement engaging with a group of religious fanatics that, in their devotion, had become lost in violence and abuse. The second story portrays humble believers involved in a violent battle between the oppressive forces of a government that had become a force of evil or even a resurrected Babylon. Instead, the reality lies somewhere in the middle, as both narratives provide an incomplete and binary framework.

In the first story, the quest for justice ignores religious freedom and the danger of misrepresentation or misunderstanding. Scholars of religion, James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher argue in *Why Waco?* that "Rather than conduct a war against so-called cults, we can more profitably and pointedly ask ourselves what we believe in."[1] Tabor and Gallagher's criticism is primarily aimed at the military-style tactics that they labeled undemocratic, fearing that Waco would demonstrate an assault on free speech and religion. The second story provides a more dangerous frame that becomes readily apparent only two years later, on April 19, 1995, as

Timothy McVeigh enacted the worst case of domestic terrorism in the United States as "revenge" for Ruby Ridge and Waco. Criminologist Mark Hamm summarizes in *Apocalypse in Oklahoma* that American Neo-Nazis and the radical right began to adopt the symbols of "fundamentalist Christianity, saying no to drugs, and most importantly, the idea that the federal government was the problem, not the solution to America's growing social ills."[2] These symbols all came to a head in Waco, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of the federal government as Babylon and framing the Branch Davidians as martyrs for the cause of white identity.

From these symbols, the project aims to contextualize Waco considering the rise of white Christian nationalism, as many histories of evangelicalism and apocalyptic thought move from the 1980s and '90s to discussing how apocalyptic theology influenced George W. Bush's presidency and the War on Terror, including Matthew Sutton's *American Apocalypse* and Daniel Hummel's *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*. In so doing, they miss the significance of new apocalyptic religious movements that altered the history of American religion and politics in the 1990s. Therefore, this project explores the importance of the apocalyptic in understanding how new religious movements, by definition, create new internal worlds that are in high tension with society by demonstrating that failing to understand this worldmaking establishes a sense of embattlement and, from this framework, argues that elements of white Christian nationalism exhibit this type of world-building.

To that end, this project proceeds in the following manner. Chapter One argues that the apocalyptic provides new religious movements with unifying worldviews in which adherents are separate from and, by extension, under threat from broader society. It accomplishes this by bringing mainstream Seventh-day Adventist and Branch Davidian apocalyptic views into conversation with the works of historians of religion Matthew Avery Sutton and Daniel Hummel

to help create the thesis' understanding of new religious movements. Concluding that this definition demonstrates that more radical elements of white Christian nationalism fall under this description of new religious movements. Chapter Two uses the case study of the Branch Davidians to argue that the apocalyptic provided them with a sense of legitimacy, agency, and embattlement, particularly over the challenge of when different worldviews come into conflict and are misunderstood. The argument in Chapter Two builds upon sociologist Howard Becker's Labelling Theory in conversation with conflict studies scholar Jayne Docherty's work on the negotiation failures of Waco. It uses the ATF's report and the definition of cult to understand Waco as an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, Chapter Three argues that the apocalyptic creates rage and catalyzes violence inside new religious movements. Through historical accounts of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, the Chapter reveals their legacies in current expressions of white Christian nationalism. Specifically, it accomplishes this by demonstrating the legacy of Waco as a symbol that resonates with many of the tensions expressed by white Christian nationalism today. From this, I argue that white Christian nationalism meets many of the theoretical hallmarks of a new religious movement, and I advance the theory that white Christian nationalism must be understood as a triangulation of politics, culture, and religion. Thus, the three Chapters assert that white Christian nationalism operates in part as an apocalyptic new religious movement that sees itself in conflict with the outside world by reexamining the Waco standoff and its legacy through this framework.

Origins of the Branch Davidians and the Label Cult

I conceptualize the Branch Davidians as a new religious movement (NRM) in this project. While the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and the media used the term "cult" to describe the Branch Davidians, I contend that this label and conceptualization aided in

brewing a sense of extremism among white nationalists who later looked to the incidents at Waco as evidence for their sense of victimization and embattlement at the hands of the federal government.

To determine what constitutes an NRM, I first use sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and Roger Finke's *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*, which explains how a movement transitions from being a "sect" or "cult" to a "religion."[3] Stark and Finke state that sects initially form in high tension with the outside world as they create their worldview, but as they lower their tension, they become more appealing to wider groups of people. However, as NRMs reduce tension, schism is almost inevitable as some adherents will want to maintain their original distinctiveness and tension with broader society.[4]

Historian of religion Jan Shipps captures this sentiment in her work *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*. Shipps describes the Latter-Day Saint movement (Mormonism) as a movement that understood itself as Christian but as the new dispensation of Christianity, a sentiment echoed by several Christian groups that emerged in the Second Great Awakening, including The Seventh-day Adventists.[5] While both groups added innovative ideas to Orthodox Christianity, Adventists emphasized their unique interpretation of prophecy after the Great Disappointment. However, the Latter-Day Saints created new practices and presented new scripture. Shipps describes these emerging religions by defining her understanding of cults and sects. For Shipps, a sect is a group that separates from orthodox or mainstream religion through argumentation over the interpretation of a tradition's story and the implications of this interpretation.[6] In contrast, Shipps describes a cult as "a group that coalesces around a leader who mounts a challenge to the fundamental integrity of a tradition's story by adding to it, subtracting from it, or by changing it more radically than merely setting out new interpretations

of the events and happenings in the existing story."[7] This gives a degree of separation between sects that merely split from their mainstream counterparts, making them not necessarily NRMs and those that are NRMs, as these movements not only reinterpret the beliefs and practices of the religions they emerge from but seek to radically alter the integrity of the initial belief/practice, creating new and novel understandings of the very meaning of the religious tradition instead of mere reinterpretation or revival.

In Shipp's assessment, these definitions would make Seventh-day Adventism a sect that eventually settled comfortably into being accepted by the religious tradition that spawned them. However, this point is also a critical expansion of Stark and Finke's understanding of NRMs as it expounds on the idea of high tension in that NRMs challenge the fundamental integrity of the traditions from which they emerge. Shipps' work demonstrates that beyond understanding the emergence of Adventism, the word cult as a specific, descriptive, and precise term not meant as derogatory is acceptable and helpful in understanding religion from an academic perspective. However, as Chapter Two will demonstrate, the nonacademic usage of the term cult by nonprofessionals is often more harmful than explanatory.

Building upon the framework of Stark, Finke, and Shipps, I understand that a lack of perceived orthodoxy puts new religious movements at odds with more established religions. In this way, high tension is the most significant supporter of ingroup identity, as it creates a sense of embattlement with the outgroup. It is from this tension that new religious practices are formed, but it can also potentially incite violence among adherents of the new religious movement. While in high tension, new religious movements typically face two options: either lower their tensions and, by extension, their distinctiveness--like the Seventh-day Adventists--or remain in a high-

tension position. In focusing on a group that chooses the latter, I explore how maintaining this high-tension position can lead to the events that transpired at Waco.

This point leads to the origin of the worldview of the Branch Davidians, which was the Seventh-day Adventist Church that emerged in 1863. However, the direct predecessor to the Branch Davidians was the Shepard's Rod, a breakoff faction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, formed by Victor Houteff in 1929. The split between mainstream Seventh-day Adventism and the Shepard's Rod was due to a difference in apocalyptic beliefs. Houteff stated Jesus would return to rule the physical world in Israel instead of the traditional Adventist view that Jesus' return would usher in a nonphysical spiritual kingdom in heaven. This distinction led Houteff to establish a compound that would become Mount Carmel in Waco, Texas. Houteff attempted to gather a remnant of the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7 to prepare for the literal coming of Christ.[8] With the death of Houteff in 1955, Ben Roden took control of the group, eventually gaining complete control of Mount Carmel around 1973. After Roden's death, his wife Lois led the Branch Davidians from 1978 until David Koresh was installed as the leader of the Branch Davidians in 1987.

While the complete history of the Branch Davidians is beyond this project's scope, it is essential to state that Shepard's Rod split into two factions. Scholar of religion Kenneth Newport explains this division in *Expecting the End*. The Shepard's Rod split into the Branch Davidians, which would eventually be led by David Koresh, and the Davidian Seventh-day Adventist church, which viewed itself as the successor of Houteff's work. It is important to note that the Davidian Seventh-day Adventist church, while similarly named, was not a part of the ATF's investigation or raid and had no association with the Branch Davidians or David Koresh.[9] Because of this distinction, the Branch Davidians will be shortened to "the Branch" to avoid

conflating the two groups. I now turn to explaining apocalyptic thought in new religious movements.

To understand the inner workings of the Branch, one must understand its vision and situate the movement in apocalyptic terms.[10] To do this, the project must clearly understand what constitutes the apocalyptic to examine these questions. Scholar of religion Mitchell Reddish defines apocalypticism as a "pattern of thoughts or world view dominated by the kinds of ideas and motifs found in apocalypses that emphasize other worlds whether they be heaven, hell, or the abode of the dead and otherworldly beings including God, Satan, angels, and demons coupled with supernatural intervention in the world."[11] While this view limits the understanding of apocalypticism to predominantly Christian or perhaps Abrahamic faiths like Judaism and Islam, Reddish's next point is central to understanding how this project understands and uses the term. Reddish argues, "Certain historical movements gained the designation as apocalyptic movements when apocalypticism provided how their adherents view reality."[12] Further, Reddish demonstrates that in the academy, apocalyptic literature has often been ignored as too complicated, not relevant to modern society, or even solely the arena for religious fanatics or extremists.[13] This definition serves the project in that it emphasizes the importance of the apocalyptic in constructing reality for adherents. Also, it demonstrates that despite the importance of apocalyptic thought inside American religion, it has sometimes been a neglected subject.

The importance of the apocalyptic is that it also separates NRMs into two categories, apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic, with the argument being that NRMs, as Reddish states, that have made the apocalyptic the core of their worldview have the more significant potential for violence and radical action. Notably, as Frances Flannery describes in *Understanding*

Apocalyptic Terrorism, these groups can either have an active or passive apocalyptic vision. The apocalyptic outlook is active rather than passive when it causes adherents to view themselves as having the ability to trigger the end times.[14] This final division between active and passive is the tipping point for when NRMs move into an area of concern, making distinguishing between NRMs that are apocalyptic and active in their view of end times critical to understanding how violence becomes legitimized. Thus, the first chapter will examine this apocalyptic thread to explain the worldmaking of the Branch and the similar evolution of white evangelicals as the basis for how white Christian nationalism coopted this worldmaking.

The Conflation of Symbols: Defining White Christian Nationalism

However, before examining how the apocalyptic defines the worldmaking of the Branch and white Christian nationalism, I need to define the term white Christian nationalism. To define white Christian nationalism, I use sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry's *Taking Back America for God.* In this work, Whitehead and Perry argue that Christian nationalism is primarily a cultural, not religious, framework, demonstrating how the threat is not merely from a small group of religious fanatics but has infiltrated the culture in such a way that almost anyone can hold at least some ideals of Christian nationalism. Perry and Whitehead also demonstrate an inverse linear relationship between increasing religious practice and Christian nationalist ideals.[15] However, to identify and operationalize the phenomenon, Whitehead and Perry center Christian nationalist identity around the following six statements: The federal government should declare the United States a Christian Nation. The federal government should advocate Christian values. The federal government should support a strict separation of church and state. The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces. The success

of the United States is part of God's plan. The federal government should allow prayer in schools.[16]

With this definition established, Perry and Whitehead take great care to emphasize that Christian nationalism does not reduce to merely white Christian or white evangelical identity and instead represents something more than religion. However, the data does suggest that white Christian males, who have historically been the dominant group in the United States, have a heightened sense of threat regarding certain minority groups, including racial minorities, immigrants, Muslims, feminists, and the LGBTQIA+ community.[17] For Whitehead and Perry, Christian nationalism means a cultural force that contains elements of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, authoritarianism, and militarism.[18] Leading to the book having three main arguments, which are that Christian nationalism is critical to understanding polarization, Christian nationalism must be understood on its own terms, and Christian nationalism is not a religion.[19] The first two points are vital to how I use and understand white Christian nationalism; however, the last point that white Christian nationalism is not a religion is a point of critique, and building upon this idea that white Christian nationalism does include religious ideals is vital.

Something More Than Cultural: Religion and White Christian Nationalism

Perry and Whitehead's work in *Taking America Back for God* is pivotal in understanding white Christian nationalism. Still, it raises concerns about dismissing Christian nationalism as a religious identity, a point that this project contests. To accomplish this critique, I use the theoretical framework of lived religion to think through the connection between Christian nationalism and religion instead of just being a cultural identity. The theory of lived religion,

popularized by sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman, is the idea that religion is present beyond merely the official texts and doctrines of religious institutions and often appears in unofficial places.[20] Ammerman explains this concept in *Studying Lived Religion*, stating that social scientists have frequently missed this aspect of religion, as they have defined religion as merely synonymous with belief.[21] Instead of simply belief or institutional affiliation, Ammerman's work highlights that religion is socially and contextually defined, leading to the idea that religion exists in various contexts. Specifically, religion becomes entangled into multiple contexts in which religious beliefs are interwoven into daily affairs and cannot be separated from social life nor into an institution, with a key example being that political organizations and affiliations can be seen as being simultaneously considered sacred and mundane.[22] This concept means that the political can be a statement of the legitimacy of political power and one's place in society yet maintain a religious identity, meaning that despite the overtones being overtly political or cultural, there remains a religious nature to many individuals' interaction with everyday civic and political practices.[23] These entangled contexts are complicated by what Ammerman refers to as interstitial religious contexts, which are lived religious practice responses to the weakening religious authorities and institutions leading towards religious practices that are individualized, diffuse, and fluid.[24] This interstitial context is an essential theoretical consideration, particularly inside new religious movements and Christian nationalism, as it can frame individual and collective joining of these groups as partially in response to this weakening religious authority, with this context explaining the decision is an individualized response to lack of institutional structure whether perceived or factual.

In summation, I view the lived religious framework as understanding that religiously Christian nationalism is an individualized, diffused, and fluid response to a perceived loss of

hegemony, with Christian nationalism attempting to provide a repletion to threats constructed around this anticipated loss of hegemony politically, culturally, and religiously. Christian nationalism can diffuse various religious identities, including mainstream ones like white evangelicalism, conservative Catholicism, and white Pentecostalism or radical religious identities like Christian Identity, an umbrella term for Christianity that holds an explicitly white nationalist interpretation of the religion, with cultural identities such as cultural whiteness, heteronormativity, and the cultural understanding of capitalism. I argue that white Christian nationalism binds these religious and cultural elements together with conservative and right-wing political identities, creating a fluid but distinct identity that can be regarded potentially as a new religious movement. Perry and Whitehead emphasize that this phenomenon is a cultural framework that, in many ways, looks and acts like religion but defies traditional institutional understanding of religion. I am merely stating along with Ammerman that even though it defies traditional understanding of religion, it does not mean it is inherently not religion. From this, the question becomes how we look for and critique white Christian nationalism in places traditionally understood as "not Christian." Building primarily on Whitehead and Perry's demonstration that the mission of Christian nationalism is symbolically associated with the lens and worldview of apocalyptic Christianity.[25]

From this, the relationship between Christian nationalism and religion becomes complicated. Whitehead and Perry state in their work that:

> But more than this, we want to stress the uniqueness of Christian nationalism as a cultural framework, distinguishing it from "religion" per se. Put simply, Christian nationalism does not encourage high moral standards or value self-sacrifice, peace, mercy, love, justice, and so on. Nor does it necessarily encourage conforming one's political opinions to those that Jesus might have...Rather, Christian nationalist appeals to "Christian foundations" and "Christian beliefs" were more like code words for a way of life that is "ours" (read: white

> conservative Christians) by divine right and which "the secularists, the humanists, the atheists, the infidels" want to take away."[26]

However, this limitation is problematic as Whitehead and Perry first define religion in a way that precludes any form of Christianity as "legitimate" that does not hold to a preset function of expressing an idealist version of arbitrary "high moral standards." This version of Christianity or even religion proposed by Perry and Whitehead befalls many of the same problems that will be explored in Chapter Two of this project in that it gives little to no agency to an adherent of this view. Along with Whitehead and Perry, I am arguing that Christian nationalism has culture and politics embedded inside of it, but also that there remain elements of religious identity. On the individual level, the selection of these three symbolic modes is merely based upon the individual understanding of inter and intra-relation between all three factors. Thus, making Christian nationalism less of a distinction between modes but, more aptly, the respondent's knowledge of what symbolic ingroup they are meant to identify with or what symbolic outgroup is threatening that understood ingroup that drives identification rather than blanket statements of whether the idea is cultural, political, or religious. This point is critical in arguing the explanatory power of understanding white Christian nationalism through the sociological theories of lived religion by attempting to demonstrate that new religious movements help us better understand the phenomenon of white Christian nationalism.

From this, the impetus is understanding how religion is evolving and how Christian nationalism is a byproduct of cultural and religious forces. The significant point is that materiality is also social, with Ammerman finding that what we make and how we make it "is lodged within the cultures and interactions of which we are a part and, in turn, shapes those cultures."[27] This point means that things and places are not tabula rosa or a blank slate but are partly defined as cultural byproducts. Nevertheless, Ammerman cautions that the meaning of

things and places is not written in stone, making practices a social construction subject to history and the collective work of people enacting them.[28] These practices help define the groups that share these practices, giving a moral standard of right and wrong and defining an ingroup and outgroup with objects and spaces, which is integral to this process.[29]

Ammerman's work substantiates Whitehead and Perry's hypothesis that white Christian nationalism is, in part, a cultural movement. Their work also points to the idea that something more than merely cultural is occurring and that white Christian nationalism must be understood as a cultural, political, and religious movement. While more traditional religious identities like evangelicalism are not intrinsically tied to Christian nationalism, there are emerging identities that are not heavily tied to mainstream religious institutions but still hold religious and spiritual understandings that lead to Christian nationalist views. From this, the theory of lived religion points to the idea that on the micro level, white Christian nationalism operates as a religious identity in an individual's lived practices based on the idea that the individual is not separating the symbols of politics and culture embedded inside this religious identification. In continuing to understand the phenomenon of Christian nationalism and how events like Waco contribute to this movement, it should be considered that white Christian nationalism also behaves like a new religious movement instead of having no religious component. This idea corresponds to the work of historian Kelly Baker in *The Gospel According to the Klan.* Baker argues that the Klan must be understood as a religious order despite the popular narrative that neglects the place of everyday religion within its ranks.[30] This point is meant to build upon Perry and Whitehead's definition of white Christian nationalism by merely arguing that the Christian or religious nature is at risk of being underplayed and under-analyzed, just as Baker argues happens to the role of religion in understanding the Ku Klux Klan. Making the argument not whether white Christian

nationalism represents Christian values but rather *whose* Christian values white Christian nationalism represents. The first chapter now moves to understanding how new and innovative understandings of the apocalyptic created these unique models of Christian values by creating unifying worldviews based on these values.

Chapter One: An Apocalyptic Vision: The Worldmaking of the Branch and Christian Nationalism

If one visits Mount Carmel Center today, they will be greeted by a monument split into three pieces. One will see this large stone monument facing the road that once had ATF agents carried in cattle trailers racing toward the compound. On the left stands a memorial to the Branch members who died either in the initial raid or the subsequent fire. On the right, above more names of Branch members who had lost their lives, is a monument to the "Seven Shepherds of the Adventist Movement." These Shepards are Ellen White (1827-1915): Cofounder of the Seventh-day Adventist Movement; Alonzo Jones (1850-1923) and Ellet Waggoner (1855-1916): Leaders of the 1888 Latter Rain movement seen as precursors to the Davidian and Branch Davidian Movements; Victor Houteff (1885-1916): Founder of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement, Benjamin Roden (1902-1978): Founder of the Branch Davidian Movement, Lois Roden (1918-1986): Second leader of the Branch Davidians, and David Koresh (Vernon Wayne Howell 1955-1993): Leader of the Branch Davidians from 1987 until the Raid on Mt. Carmel. This monument demonstrates that while the world learned of the Branch in 1993, the bedrock for this movement and its cataclysmic confrontation had been developed over nearly a hundred years. It is this history I now turn to understand how this legacy led to Waco.

This history of the Branch begins in the nineteenth century, as the dominance of postmillennial eschatology would begin to fade, paving the way for a resurgent form of

premillennial eschatology. A quick and rudimentary summary of these views is that premillennialists hold that Jesus will return after a period of tribulation and continual worsening of the world, and in contrast, postmillennialists hold that Jesus will return after a period of improvement and mass conversion to Christianity. A crucial intersection in this shift was Millerism. A preacher, William Miller, asserted that Jesus would return in 1844, and this prediction would result in an event known as the Great Disappointment when Jesus did not return as stated. While the Great Disappointment in 1844 would see the collapse of the Millerite movement, this movement gave birth to two new groups that continue to uphold the historical view of premillennial eschatology. These movements are the Seventh-day Adventists and the Watch Tower Society, which became the Jehovah's Witnesses.[31] A significant distinction is that neither the Seventh-day Adventists nor the Jehovah's Witness movement gave Israel a unique prophetic role, holding that the 144,000 in Revelation 14 are members of their denomination instead of converted Jews.[32] The distinctness of this interpretation will be explored in more depth as the differences between these two visions of the apocalypse is the primary driver of how the Branch understood itself and the world around it.

The Millerite movement emerged from the soil of the Second Great Awakening. This period, which lasted from around 1790 to 1840, saw the emergence of several new religious movements, with two of the most prominent being the Seventh-day Adventists formed from the Millerites and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also colloquially known as the Mormons. However, while these groups shared their origins during this revival period, their attempts to legitimize themselves differed. For example, William Miller was associated with and credentialed by mainstream Christianity. In contrast, historian Jan Shipps demonstrates that Joseph Smith, the founder of the Latter-Day Saint movement, came from a family that was never

a part of mainstream Christian denominations but instead members of heterogenous assemblages of Christian "seekers." Shipps explains, "During much of the decade of the 1820s, the Smith family was virtually a microcosm of the religious macrocosm in which it was immersed."[33] Demonstrating the kind of religious soil present during the onset of the Second Great Awakening. The early Latter-Day Saints and Millerites embodied the changes present in American culture at the start of the 19th century. In this way, explaining the development of the Branch can also be seen as a microcosm of the religious macrocosm of the 20th century. The project now turns to the apocalyptic views of Ellen White, a pioneer of Adventism, to understand her worldbuilding by uncovering how her work formed the core of the Branch's theology and how they used her work to challenge the fundamental integrity of mainstream Adventism.

Sister White and Brother Roden: Adventist and Branch Apocalypticism

One of the co-founders of Seventh-day Adventism, Ellen White's apocalyptic views are critical to understanding Adventist, Davidian, and Branch worldmaking as White not only helped solidify Adventist apocalyptic views but also helped transform the Millerites into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the wake of the Great Disappointment. White's apocalyptic views are primarily presented in her 1858 book *The Great Controversy*,[34] in which White outlines the end of the world and lays out her interpretation of Christian history. To understand the influence of White, Victor Houteff, who founded the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, explained his view of Ellen White in the *Symbolic Code Volume 7*, published in 1941, expressing the belief that anyone who views the Bible as the textbook for Christians should take White's message seriously. Houteff uses this claim to justify his positions as correct but also uses White's views about the end of the world by claiming that anyone who disagrees with the teaching of the "Shepard's

Rod," his publication, and the basis of Davidian theology, disagrees with White and the Bible.[35] Or rather, anyone who disagreed with his breakaway faction, which the Branch emerged from, disagreed with Adventism and Christianity. So important is this book for the Branch that the rebuilt Mt. Carmel center offers this book for free to anyone who visits the remains of the compound.

Perhaps the most crucial move that defines White's view is that, unlike other forms that take a neutral or dismissive view of Catholicism, White centers Catholicism not only as incorrect but as the primary antagonist to "true remnant" Christianity. Specifically, White argues that the Catholic Church never represented true Christianity at any point in history, as she states that even in the earliest period of Christianity, a dichotomy existed between "one class studies the savior's life and earnestly seeks to correct their defects as opposed to the other class that shuns the plain practical truth which exposes their errors."[36] In this view, Roman Catholicism is not the established church but rather a political compromise between Christianity and Paganism. This distinction is important as it first demonstrates that White is holding to a protestant ideal and formed the narrative for the legitimacy of the Adventist worldview in opposition to Catholicism. A transparent element of this is that for White, remnants of Christianity remained with one mark of true Christianity being Saturday worship and Sabbath, with White admonishing Sunday worship as lacking scriptural evidence.[37] This distinction between Saturday and Sunday worship creates a clear boundary between "true believers" and those "led astray" by Catholicism.

In addition, another pattern of "true" Christianity, according to White, emphasizes the Bible as the only rule of faith. This idea of "true remnant" Christianity based on Sabbath-keeping is an imperative move as while for White, the mark of the beast was still to be revealed, other Adventists have interpreted the mark of the beast to be imposed Sunday worship by the Catholic

church, which will be the final test for "true" Sabbath-keeping and Bible-believing Christians.[38] An important note is to be drawn from this statement that in the Adventist view, the church will experience tribulation and not experience a rapture; instead, the church is to be tested in the final days. Looking at the four criteria of NRMs, we find that this view, while in high tension with Catholicism, is not necessarily in high tension with all of society merely having distinctions that would be normal in religious life. Additionally, White does not seem to argue that her anti-Catholicism is a fundamental attack on the integrity of Christianity but rather a reinterpretation grounded in Protestantism. Finally, while White's views are inherently apocalyptic and central to her worldview, her ideas are passive, not active, in that Adventists must go through a period of tribulation that they will not bring about but merely pass through before the end.

While not without controversy, White's views moved Seventh-day Adventism from the potential collapse of the Millerites to a distinct denomination. White's views and work can be seen in contemporary Adventist literature, such as *Seventh-day Adventists' Believe,* particularly in explaining the denomination's doctrines. The book describes the thirteenth of its twenty-eight doctrines as being about being a remnant and the mission that Seventh-day Adventism experiences as the remnant church. The book explains, "The universal church is composed of all who truly believe in Christ, but in the last days, a time of widespread apostasy, a remnant has been called out to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus."[39] According to Adventists, this corresponds with the three angels featured in Revelation 14, with the first angel representing the spreading of the gospel to the world. The second angel warns of the apostasy of Babylon and human forms of worship in opposition to the first angel's message. Finally, the third angel warns against the worship of the beast or Antichrist, meaning that the three angels' messages set the Adventists apart as remnant by their view that they have accepted and kept all

three of the angels' messages.[40] Prophecy is also an accepted view of Adventism found in Doctrine eighteen, stating,

> One of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is prophecy. This gift is an identifying mark of the remnant church and was manifested in the ministry of Ellen G. White- the Lord's messenger. Her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth, providing comfort, guidance, instruction, and correction to the church. They also make clear that the Bible is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.[41]

However, the book clarifies that Ellen White never took on the title of Prophetess but would answer whether she was a prophet by stating, "I have ever responded I am the Lord's Messenger."[42] While complicated, White and Adventists point to Revelation 14 as a source of authenticity for Adventism. This so-called Three Angels Message is of great importance to Adventism and its offshoots and would be reinterpreted by Victor Houteff, Ben Roden, and David Koresh as a source of their mission on Earth.

This mission on earth is seen with Victor Houteff's defense of his break with mainstream Adventism over the idea of Jesus returning to a literal Kingdom on Earth that he supports through presenting Daniel 2:44, Jeremiah 51:20, Hosea 3:4, Isaiah 2:14, and many other passages of the Bible as proof texts.[43] In forming the Branch, Ben Roden further expounds on the reasons for breaking from mainstream Adventism in *Revival and Reformation.* In Roden's view, the General Conference, the highest governing body of Seventh-day Adventism, had become corrupted as early as 1895. Having given up their distinctives, mainstream Adventists had lost the Spirit of Prophecy, and any hope of reorganization without the Spirit was doomed to fail. Instead, Roden proclaimed that the Branch would bring the necessary revival and reformation for faithful remnant Christianity.[44]

Roden's statement demonstrates the desire to maintain Adventism as a high-tension religion, as described by Stark and Finke, directly in response to mainstream Adventism becoming less distinctive in Roden's eyes. To maintain this distinctiveness in Roden's view, all that is required is that Adventists and other Christians realize that the Branch is the home of the Spirit. In Roden's understanding, this revelation will result in a pure and clean church or Bride of Christ by cutting off lukewarm Christians from the "true" Church. This cutting off lukewarm Christians results in the destruction of Seventh-day Adventism, with the new pure remnant (The Branch) receiving a new name at the end of days. In Roden's view, the Branch is the catalyst and final organization of the Church until the Second Advent, which separates the Branch even from other Davidian Churches as it does not seek to reform the Seventh-day Adventist church. However, instead, Roden saw it as fulfilling the Spirit's wishes for the original Adventist pioneers.[45] Completing the move of the Branch from a high-tension sect of Adventism or even the Davidians to an NRM by attempting to fundamentally reform the idea of Adventism by attacking the integrity of both Adventists and Davidians by labeling them as illegitimate. From this argument, the division between Davidian and Branch theology is that the Davidians are best seen as a reform or fundamentalist movement inside Seventh-day Adventism. In contrast, the Branch sees itself as a primitive or original movement that carries on the legacy of original Adventism. Returning to Shipp's definitions, this distinction would make the Davidians a sect movement out of Seventh-day Adventism and the Branch a restorationist cult movement. This can be seen in a letter dated July 8, 1975, where Roden states that Davidians should know better because of their "blaze of light," yet by refusing the message of the Branch are Laodicean or Superlaodicean, meaning that refusing Roden's vision labeled one lukewarm or a false Christian—highlighting how Roden believed himself to be the sole prophet and that mainstream

and Davidian Adventism had gone astray despite having the "light" of knowledge and power of the spirit at a previous time. [46] All of these exemplify Shipp's cult designation as it appears that Roden was attempting to present a new understanding of both apocalypticism and the true history of Adventism.

Furthering this argument is that another break from mainstream Adventism is that Ben Roden, like other Davidians and later Branch members, holds that not only are the books of Daniel and Revelation prophetic but also books like Ezekiel, which is in line with dispensationalism rather than the historical method of eschatology employed by Adventists. One example is in Roden's sermon *Tyre and Zidon*, where Roden explains that Ezekiel 26 to 28 contains political and religious significance. Roden explains that the prophecy of Ezekiel 26 to 28 is threefold about the present time. First, for Roden, Ezekiel 26 warns of the coming purification of the Church, with Roden stating that Ellen White warned of this coming calamity. One significant aspect of this purification is that those who believe that the kingdom will not come literally on Earth will be wiped away, with Roden stating that in his view, White fought against the General Conference in 1888 over the preservation of the Earthly Kingdom and that if the Conference held to this position, the kingdom could have come within two years.[47] Second, chapter 27 for Roden explains that Ezekiel's prophecy is fulfilled in the book of Revelation and that this prophecy tells of the present time and the time to come. Third and finally, chapter 28 for Roden warns of destruction and the turning of Israel back to God after the last battle when the chosen 144,000 will be granted governance in God's earthly kingdom.[48] Revealing that for Davidians and the Branch, apocalyptic thought and White's work are read with a futurist hermeneutic, a type of reading in contrast to mainstream Adventists but in line with evangelicals

with Roden's claims demonstrating the centrality of his interpretation of the apocalyptic to his worldview.

Where Ben Roden draws his legitimation for his views is readily apparent in White's work. She emphasizes that everything in history points to the fulfillment of the Second Advent, which cannot occur "until after the great apostasy, and the long reign of the man of sin, can we look for the advent of our Lord."[49] White casts the mission of the new church as harbingers of this Advent with an imperative to warn others of the impending second coming. This holding period of waiting for further light is an important distinction that was picked up by both the Davidian and Branch offshoots as they used this ideal of further Revelation as the basis for their existence.

Specifically, the use of further light is the backbone of worldbuilding of the Branch, with Ben Roden having expressed this view in his sermon, *The Living Spirit of Prophecy.* This sermon states that while all churches and Christians have had the chance to receive the Spirit of Prophecy or further light, the Seventh-day Adventist church and the Davidians received the closest to present truth than any other type of Christianity.[50] For Roden specifically, only the Branch has the current living Spirit of Prophecy in their midst, and all other prophets, even those of Adventism, are dead. For Roden, this means there are two essential factors about prophecy. First, to have the Spirit of Prophecy is to have the Holy Spirit in your midst, and only prophets can have the power of interpretation regarding truth and scripture. This statement caused Roden to conclude that the Branch is a remnant with the power of the Holy Spirit and that the Branch as a remnant contains the sole prophet on Earth. Further, in Roden's view, the Bible, Ellen White, and Victor Houteff's writing were inspired by this Spirit of Prophecy, and without this Spirit, the Bible is inactive. This living Spirit also separates the Branch as the chosen remnant in

replacement of Jews as God's chosen people, with Roden explaining that while the Jews originally had this Spirit, they did away with their prophets and turned to the writings of Moses, leading to the Spirit of Prophecy residing in Christianity and ultimately the Branch.[51]

However, burgeoned by this apocalyptic thought, anti-Catholicism would inspire the political activity of Branch founder Ben Roden. The centrality of Roden's anti-Catholicism can be found in a letter dated May 1, 1974, addressed to Brother and Sister Bunds. Roden expressed, "This last Sabbath, some of us attended a building dedication at Baylor University. Mr. Jaworski, the Watergate prosecutor, was the guest speaker. We held up large posters that declared, 'We are fed up with Catholics crucifying Nixon' and the 'Vatican Built Watergate Frameup."[52] This action was justified by Roden through the use of *The Great Controversy* in that "The Lord gives special truth to his people in an emergency, who dare refuses to publish it."[53] This sentiment would drive Branch actions with another letter addressed to the Bunds dated June 20, 1974, finding Roden expressing his praise to the Lord for wonderful guidance and providence during a trip to Washington D.C. to warn senior government officials of the dangers of the coming Catholic takeover. Specifically, during this trip, Roden states he delivered a tract to President Nixon, and upon returning to Texas, Roden attended a speech by Gerald R. Ford, where Ford was also presented with a Branch tract.[54] Roden's statements show that the Branch not only took White's warning of Catholic takeover seriously but also began to see the necessity of taking political action to avoid calamity.

Roden also emphasized White's view of the Sunday Sabbath as a mark of true Christianity. This view is seen clearly in a February 26, 1976, letter that warns of the impending onset of Sunday worship and the eventual taking of the United States into a Soviet World government being organized by agents of the radical left in America, including the World

Council of churches, revealing the fear of what the end times meant for American politics in the Branch's view.[55] The political nature of the Branch is a significant change in the Adventist understanding of apocalypticism as Millerite and later Seventh-day Adventist apocalyptic views were primarily apolitical. However, Ben Roden's writings provide political orientations and activism inside Adventism and the political sphere.[56] This letter also emphasizes that, like white evangelicals, the Branch had begun to fuse its theology of the end times with domestic and international politics. However, unlike in white evangelical apocalyptic thought, the takeover by Catholicism is the driving action for the radical left and the Soviet Union rather than an idea of a secular takeover prominent among white evangelicals. It is also worth noting that these political actions by the Branch predate the formation of organizations like the Moral Majority that would form the core of the emerging Christian Right, underlying how apocalypticism catalyzed political action for both parties.

While both the political ideas and emphasis on the apocalyptic became more muted under Lois Roden's tenure, the ideas of David Koresh brought apocalypticism back to the forefront of Branch identity. While Koresh, who had difficulties writing, produced little written work, some of later Branch apocalypticism can be discerned from Clive Doyle, who survived the fire at Mt. Carmel and gave his side of the story in *A Journey to Waco: an autobiography of a Branch Davidian* co-written with historian of religion Catherine Wessinger and librarian Mattew Whitmer. According to Doyle, Koresh made scripture come alive, and in Koresh's view, "all the prophets in the Bible were writing more for our day than for their own time. Even though some of what they wrote pertained to their time, the prophecies projected into the last days."[57] This statement by Koresh demonstrates how the apocalyptic worldbuilding of White came to a head, with Koresh continuing and building upon White's framework and Houteff and Roden's

additions to construct the world of the Branch. This worldview would conflict with the ATF and the FBI's worldviews, helping to catalyze the violent standoff between the Branch and the Federal Government.

Thus, as church historian William Pitts summarizes in his article *Changing Views of the Millennium in the Davidian Tradition,* the Branch does not deny its Adventist heritage. Instead, they build upon it with the key theme that Christ's return is imminent, creating a unifying worldview. However, each leader of the Davidians and the Branch added new dimensions, which Pitts argues helps sustain the authoritarian leadership style and allows for the creation of new or innovative theological ideas.[58] It clarifies that the Branch meets all four of the criteria of NRMs described in the intro as the Branch was in high tension with the outside world, it sought to challenge and transform its Adventist heritage radically, it featured the apocalyptic as central to its worldview, and it promoted the idea that members could bring about the end times themselves specifically with Koresh believing he himself could open the seven seals of Revelation chapters 5-8.[59] From this summation, I now argue that white Evangelicals experienced a similar kind of worldbuilding in the 20th century, that white Christian nationalism has built upon to sustain its ideals of authoritarian leadership. Specifically, the idea that either the apocalypse or Jesus' return is imminent is the imperative unifier that creates embattled and radical worldviews inside the Branch and white Christian nationalism.

The Apocalyptic Goes Mainstream: How Evangelicals Created a Cultural Phenomenon

The Great Disappointment led to the collapse of the broad acceptance of the apocalyptic views held by William Miller and the Adventists. There was now a vacuum that would be filled by an entirely new form of apocalypticism spearheaded by John Nelson Darby, a member of the

Plymouth Brethren in Ireland who created a system known as dispensationalism. This form of apocalypticism would find its American champion in the revivals of 1875-1877 headed by Dwight Moody, in which apocalypticism began to move from esoteric to the masses. Moody's teaching of premillennialism was simple in that Jesus was coming at any moment, and for the first time, the masses understood they could be left behind. This simple message obfuscated the complexities and differences of premillennial dispensationalism. Still, it helped the broader public understand the core message of the eschatology that the world was marked for destruction and those who were faithful would be raptured out.[60]

With this system in mind, the onset of The Great War in 1914 provided the necessary soil for the explosion of premillennial dispensationalism, with the war seen as preliminary to the battle of Armageddon, exposing the American populace to the dangers of the looming apocalypse through the idea that the war was God's way of punishing nations for sin.[61] This idea of punishment helped to begin the coevolution of premillennialism with a new form of explicit Christian Nationalism in the United States by emphasizing repentance and the fate of America's success in tandem with belief in God.[62] This fledgling Christian Nationalism was also galvanized by many viewing the moves by President Woodrow Wilson's consolidating of federal power and interventionism in the economy as signs that the way was being paved for the Antichrist, demonstrating that even at this point in history, not only was secularism the enemy but also socialism and communism.[63]

This divide began the first rounds of what would eventually become the culture war as premillennial dispensationalists linked changes in American society like new philosophies on childrearing, the growing role and eventual liberation of women, and a newfound openness to sexuality with birth control to existential threats to their ingroup. A precursor to the eventual

flashpoint of abortion, arguments about birth control were often draped in nativist language about the decline of the white race. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, most public statements and positions on abortion were essentially based on being anticonception. Nevertheless, some early activists were already crediting the practice of abortion as nothing more than murder.[64] As historian of religion Daniel Hummel demonstrates, by the 1920s, the apocalyptic view was a new subculture that defined and proved critical in the fundamentalist movement. Unlike early attempts at synthesizing a fundamentalist position, dispensationalism imposed an order on disparate beliefs, practices, and networks, creating dispensationalism as a system.[65]

This rise of dispensationalism and nativism belies the hidden logic of premillennial dispensationalism, as it provided burgeoning fundamentalist and later evangelical activists with an apocalyptic fatalism to their political ideas, including racism, sexism, and homophobia. This idea can be seen at the beginning of the movement as William Blackstone, an early proponent of dispensationalism, worried about the future of politics and society, stating, “We need only refer to the progress of Nihilism, Socialism, Communism, and Anarchy. Could there be anything worse than the creed of the latter, viz: The first lie is God, and the second is the Law. They openly avow that their mission is to destroy the present social structure.”[66] The emphasis on social structure as the most significant thing under threat is telling as it demonstrates that for Blackstone and early dispensationalists, threats to the systems in place that supported white supremacy were not only wrong but, indeed, a harbinger of the end of the world. Further, it also demonstrates that it was the duty of the Christian to convert others to this ideology to prevent this potential societal collapse.

Historian of religion Anthea Butler, in her work *White Evangelicalism Racism*, also charts that the apocalyptic provided the framework for white evangelicals to oppose the Civil Rights Movement through apocalyptic politics. Chief among this opposition was the linking of the Civil Rights Movement with communism, the same enemy that Blackstone warned of as an emerging threat. Butler explains that for white evangelicals' communism was not merely a social movement nor political ideology but rather an atheistic movement that sought to destroy Christianity. Butler records that evangelist Billy Graham, who was paramount to this movement, stated, "The next world war will occur in five years if Christ tarries." Before declaring that, "It will make the first two look like a little fight. This world war will sweep civilization into oblivion unless Christ comes and stops it."[67] Butler affirms that this mapped neatly onto premillennial dispensationalism in that individual salvation was the only solution as opposed to any form of collective action like the Civil Rights Movement in that any form of collective action was viewed with suspicion of being communist.[68] Thus, just as the Branch legitimized itself through the apocalyptic idea that they were a particular remnant meant to save America from Catholicism and carry on the actual work of Christianity, mainstream white evangelicals also used the apocalypse to reinforce their idea through their vision of the end of the world especially concerning race. This apocalyptic evangelical vision is best summarized by Billy Graham, stating that "Only when Christ Comes again will little white children of Alabama walk hand in hand with little Black children."[69] Through this response, the idea of fatalism creeps in regarding issues like racism, homophobia, and sexism in that they are not problems to ever be solved or alleviated until the world ends, as the adherent can only expect these to be continuing problems in a worsening world.

Further, Hummel explains that the rise of dispensationalism provides two critical divisions to help explain the rise of evangelicalism in American politics and culture. First, dispensationalism provided the link between theology and culture that shaped evangelical identity, allowing for cooperation between groups like fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Christian Nationalists, and New Calvinists that, while distinct, have engaged the same cultural productions through the lens of dispensationalism. Second, dispensationalism facilitates the understanding of the trend of polarization amongst evangelicals through premillennial dispensationalism, providing the theological framework to read the Bible and understand the world for at least four generations and undergirds evangelicalism's theologically thin but politically robust culture.[70]

Even in its beginning, while indeed theological, dispensationalism by its nature was more focused on cultural production than systematic theology through its unique relationship with commercial viability with books like Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* or Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkin's Left Behind series becoming bestsellers making them cornerstones of widespread interest. This commercial success resulted in one of the few times theology has straddled popular cultures with dispensationalism, positioning itself as a rival to more mainstream and academic culture by providing evangelical Christians with a built-in "counterculture." Additional crises, such as declining church attendance and youth revolt, helped pave the way for fusion with Christian nationalism as it saw the only way forward for the United States to be a decisive actor in the looming apocalypse conflating Republican politics with prophecy.[71] This fusion came to fruition during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Now, premillennial dispensationalists finally had a friendly ear in the White House. Reagan expressed great interest in evangelical apocalypticism in tandem with his association with the new political force of the Religious Right. While Reagan was never fully stooped in the apocalypticism of the Religious Right, his views are apparent in

quotes like “Live as though Christ was coming back today; act as if the rapture was a millennium away.”[72] While Reagan’s faith remains a topic of debate among scholars, we see the move of premillennialism from a disparate movement to the highest echelon of power in the United States. Therefore, the religious right and Reagan introduced the final part of the conversion of premillennialism from solely an eschatology to part of the political corpus by emphasizing that America must reform to stay the execution of the world and God’s final judgment through reinstating school prayer, stopping abortion, improving schools, and banning pornography.[73]

Today, premillennial dispensationalism is essentially the default for many white evangelicals. However, by the latter half of the 20th century, belief in prophecy was no longer solely in the sacred domain and had become a part of the secular imagination. This secularization of the apocalyptic created what cultural historian Paul Boyer calls the “secular apocalypse.” With nonexplicitly Christian films like *The Omen* and *The Final Conflict* and secular musicians like Barry McGuire and his song “The Eve of Destruction” or David Bowie’s “We’ve Got Five More Years” expressing apocalyptic themes in their messaging, the sentiment that the world would soon end had gone from being merely held by a subset of radical Christianity to having its moment in the public spotlight.[74] Now, the rapture and Armageddon were diffused into the American culture, with the imagery of dispensationalism becoming part of the cultural zeitgeist.[75]

However, it is essential to note that this history does not point to premillennial dispensationalism nor white evangelicalism as an NRM, as it misses two key features. First, at no point does this history point to a fundamental attack on the integrity of Christianity, as it merely appears as a reinterpretation of the theology of the end times. Second, while this form of apocalypticism is certainly politically active, there is not necessarily the indication that, for most

adherents, an active apocalyptic outlook is present, like mainstream Adventism. However, as apocalypticism and white Christian nationalism have evolved throughout American history, the question remains over whether this movement might meet the criteria as just as Adventism was the soil from which the Branch emerged, is it possible that the apocalyptic thinking of white evangelicalism may be the soil for which contemporary white Christian nationalism grows from.

Armageddon in America: Apocalyptic Beliefs and White Christian Nationalism

Today, the apocalyptic is, in fact, a primary driver of identifying with Christian nationalism, with this relationship quantified in sociologists Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry's *The Flag + The Cross*. However, while the previous section underscored how the apocalyptic influenced culture, Gorski and Perry's work also highlights that apocalyptic belief is tied into an overlap with conspiracy theories like QAnon and the capital insurrectionists present on January 6th. Of note is that while comingled with radical or conspiratorial groups, Christian nationalism, while associated with white evangelicals, is not exclusively a white evangelical phenomenon, nor are all white evangelicals automatically Christian nationalists. [76] Instead, Christian nationalists find supporters among mainline Protestants, white Roman Catholics, and white Pentecostals, among other mainstream Christian groups and denominations. Christian nationalist support is also found among those who do not identify as Christian, including those who are secular. [77] From this plurality, there appears also to be the possibility that Christian nationalism broadly and white Christian nationalism specifically would also see support from those explicitly identified with NRMs. The overlap with conspiracy theories and the central correlation with the apocalyptic also demonstrates the idea that white Christian nationalism could be considered an

NRM itself, with belief in conspiracy theories and violent actions justifying the idea that white Christian nationalism is in high tension with society meeting the first criteria.

This work also demonstrates that Trump's Make America Great Again movement should be considered a semi-secular version of white Christian nationalism, highlighting Trump's use of disaster as akin to the white evangelical apocalyptic idea that things are only going to get worse and his promises to restore the broken man underscore an active role in this idea.[78] The assessment is that white Christian nationalism is not a conservative movement but rather a reactionary one that seeks to destroy the current status quo and revert to a mythic past.[79] This destruction of the status quo and desire for a mythic past demonstrates that white Christian nationalism meets the idea that it threatens and undermines the very integrity and identity of both Christian religious ideals and the American political ideal. The indication is that this movement is demonstrably in high tension with broader society and meets the second criterion of what I have defined as an NRM in that it attempts to radically redefine the interpretation of beliefs and the past.

Further, Gorski and Perry demonstrate that belief in the rapture and Armageddon was the most significant predictor of Christian nationalist identity in the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey, the only wave that asked both questions. The belief that the world would end in the battle of Armageddon, a generic form of identifying with Christian apocalyptic thought, correlated with an 11-point increase in identifying with Christian nationalism on a 24-point scale. In tandem, belief in the rapture that directly corresponds to premillennial dispensational belief saw a 10-point increase in identifying with Christian nationalism on a 24-point scale.[80] With this tight correlation between the apocalyptic and identifying with Christian nationalism, there is also evidence that the apocalyptic is central to white Christian nationalism, fulfilling the third

criterion. From this, the linkage between Christian apocalyptic ideas and Christian nationalism represents a significant part of understanding the phenomenon that Christian nationalism represents with apocalyptic belief, not only producing a correlation between identifying with but also driving the underlying behavior of Christian nationalism. This point is how white Christian nationalism diverges from the apocalypticism of white evangelicalism in that it not only meets the criteria of being high tension and apocalyptic focused, but it also seeks to radically alter understandings and integrity of what it means to be Christian and American, as it undercuts the ideal of the separation of church and state, upholds authoritarian ideals, and dismisses the norm of democracy.

Scholar of religion Bradley Onishi's *Preparing for War* solidifies this relationship and presents the groundwork for linking contemporary development with the Waco case study presented in Chapter Two. In his work, Onishi traces the history of Christian nationalism and connects it to organizations like the John Birch Society, a far-right organization that, like contemporary Christian nationalists, began to adopt conspiracy theories as the organization grew and evolved. Examples of these conspiracy theories include the idea that significant figures like Dwight Eisenhower were communists and the idea that communists were secretly controlling the world's government behind the curtains.[81] This connection demonstrates that contemporary ideas like the deep state are modernized versions of older conspiracies.

It also shows how the radical right and the religious right can move in tandem with each other, with Onishi explaining that groups like the Alt or alternative right, which is comprised of openly xenophobic and racist figures, and the religious right both operate under the principle of a mythic America that both groups see as under siege from pluralism, immigration, civil rights, and the LGBTQIA+ community just as the John Birch society saw America under threat of

communism.[82] Onishi, citing political scientists Paul Djupe and Jacob Dennen, also found that belief in QAnon was also linked to antisemitism and that the 25 percent of those surveyed who strongly believed in Christian nationalism also agreed with QAnon at a rate of 73 percent—further demonstrating that white Christian nationalism is fundamentally reinterpreting the narrative of Christianity and the United States.[83] What is particularly concerning, though, is that Onishi is pointing to the final criteria that makes white Christian nationalism not only a kind of NRM but also a dangerous one, as the idea that America and their understanding of Christianity are under siege and must be fought for highlights a shift from passive to active apocalyptic thought.

This fourth and final criterion is shown as Onishi highlights the phenomenon of white Christian nationalists who have begun creating separatist communities based on the idea of being the chosen remnant in a direct parallel to the Waco Siege. A prominent leader of this movement is James Wesley Rawles, a former member of U.S. military intelligence who branded the states of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and even parts of Washington as the American Redout. The idea of the Redout is a place to make a last stand for "traditional" American values in the face of a coming political and economic collapse or apocalypse.[84] Rawles mentions explicitly that a fight will occur between the government and "patriots," which Rawles sees as having already started. This redoubt movement and its being a part of a chosen remnant echoes the events of the Waco siege, demonstrating the need to understand Waco in the context of these contemporary developments. It also underscores a move away from the primarily passive-apocalyptic ideals of white evangelicals, as it shows that the most radical adherents of white Christian nationalism have begun developing an active apocalypticism in which they believe they will fight and win a final battle between "good" and "evil" just as the Branch thought they were doing.

To conclude this analysis, I turn to *In Our Own Image: How Americans Rate Jesus on the Ideological Spectrum* by sociologists Samuel Perry, Joshua Grubbs, and Cyrus Schleifer found that most Americans place Jesus' political ideology in the middle, with 40% of all Americans placing Jesus as either in the center ideologically or slightly right of center (5 or 6 on a 10-point scale). However, when comparing Christians and non-Christians in the survey, Christians were twice as likely to select Jesus as being extremely rightwing than their non-Christian counterparts.[85] Their analysis demonstrates a strong correlation between being ideologically rightwing and identifying Jesus as also rightwing. Identifying with Christian nationalism was also a strong predictor of this relationship, with this result holding for self-identified Christians and non-Christians or level of religiosity.[86] This analysis concludes that Jesus, like religious identities, is under threat of being emptied of theological meaning, with this meaning replaced by ideological, partisan, and moral meanings.[87] This conclusion serves the hypothesis that white Christian nationalism operates like an NRM in two ways. First, it supports the understanding of NRM as in high tension with broader society by demonstrating that as one increases association with Christian nationalism, they are more likely to place Jesus in the ideological extremity of being extremely rightwing. This point strongly correlates with the idea that while explicitly political, there is an association between political and religious symbols, even among those not expressly identified as Christian, as hypothesized from the lived religious framework. Second, it also demonstrates the notion that Christian nationalism as an NRM seeks to rewrite the fundamental story of who Jesus or Christianity is in line with the definition of cult supplied by Shipps. The reality is that as an NRM, white Christian nationalism is more dangerous than merely a political or cultural force as it seeks to redefine understanding of politics, culture, and perhaps most importantly, religion to unify its worldview towards consuming and reinterpreting

all three elements to its ends. Therefore, this Chapter concludes that apocalyptic thinking provides a cultural and political heuristic by giving group members a definitive identity through an apocalyptic worldview that not only strengthens ingroup identity but also makes NRMs more dangerous. With this established, the next Chapter uses the Branch to demonstrate what happens when these worldviews conflict with other worldviews and narratives.

Chapter Two: 51 Days: New Religious Movements and the Battle for Agency

In examining the Waco siege, much attention has been given to the role of Federal Law Enforcement and the political and cultural ramifications of an increasingly militarized police force. Less attention, however, has been given to the theological development of the Branch and the labeling of this organization as a "cult," as explored in Chapter One. Still, a larger question remains about how a multi-racial and international organization like the Branch became a rallying point for white supremacists, Christian Identitarians, and even contemporary Christian nationalists. This Chapter examines the *Report of the Department of the Treasury on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearm's Investigation of Vernon Wayne Howell, also known as David Koresh.*[88] Using this source to understand the lead-up to the raid and the prior investigation of the Branch, I argue that the label of the Branch as a "cult" was primarily a construction to manufacture consent for the raid. In addition, it will argue that the ATF and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) helped to socially construct the legacy of Waco as a symbol of martyrdom for the radical right. This symbol for the radical right is a cultural myth of being embattled with the Federal Government and the feeling of being under siege themselves. It will also address how new religions use the apocalyptic to provide a sense of agency and legitimation and how this affected the negotiation and de-escalation process during the siege.

However, it should be stated that at no point is this project attempting to communicate that the ATF was wrong in its decision to arrest Koresh, nor is it an attempt to ignore or justify the illegal activities committed by the Branch, including physical and sexual abuse of minors in addition to the violation of firearm law. It also does not attempt to make a value claim on the legitimacy of the Branch as a religion or cult; instead, it tries to understand the social implications of a group labeled as a cult. This Chapter embraces and engages sociologist Howard Becker's labeling theory as a form of understanding social phenomena. By engaging labeling theory, the Chapter aims to apply this formulation of labeling of individuals or groups to the field of sociology of religion by showing how this theory has explanatory power for understanding new religious movements.

Manufacturing Consent: The Construction of the Branch as a Cult

In examining the nature of the Branch as a cult, it is imperative to understand that the *Treasury Report* makes no effort to portray the Branch as anything other than a cult. This label is apparent as even page one refers to the Branch as a cult and relegates any discussion over the term to a footnote that provides the only historical or religious context contained in the entire report, which states:

> The Branch Davidian movement was started by a number of Seventh Day Adventists (sic) who believed strongly in the prophecies of the book of Revelation. David Koresh, then named Vernon Wayne Howell, took over leadership of the group in 1987. The Compound residents were extremely devoted to Koresh, and many apparently believed that he was the lamb of God. In the course of this report, the Review has used the term "cult" to refer to Koresh and his followers. The term is not intended and should not be taken as a reference to the Branch Davidian movement generally.[89] The Review is quite aware that "cult" has pejorative connotations, and that outsiders-particularly those in the government-should avoid casting aspersions on those whose religious beliefs are different from their own. The definition of cult in Webster's Third New International Dictionary (unabridged) includes: "a great or excessive devotion or

> dedication to some person, idea or thing" and "a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious." In light of the evidence of the conduct of Koresh and his followers set out in this report, the Review finds "cult" to be an apt characterization.[90]

This model that the Branch was an "unorthodox" group dedicated to a singular person developed throughout the entire investigation into activities at Mount Carmel. Sociologists Romley and Browden's *Cults and New Religions: A Brief History* highlights three problems with this definition of cult.[91] First, there is difficulty in reducing religious expression into a checklist for either being a cult or not. Second, the assertion by the ATF that one of the primary factors of being a cult is great or excessive devotion calls into question not only who has the authority to define devotion to be in excess but also makes no attempt to discern when these types of faith would move from "normal" or "safe" to "aberrant" or "harmful." The problem lies in the fact this statement makes no distinction between emerging unorthodox religions that pose no danger to society or harm to members and other groups that would or will engage in violent activities. [92] Cowan and Bromley's problematizing of this definition reveals that not only was, as the ATF acknowledges, the term cult pejorative, but it is also ineffective for understanding religious behavior.

In addition to the cult as pejorative, another problem arises when analyzing new religious movements like the Branch. This problem is the conflation of various new religious movements into amalgamations. When the *Treasury Report* was published, the term cult had become culturally synonymous with Jim Jones and his movement known as The People's Temple, which provided federal agents with a heuristic of what movements like the Branch must be like and how they must act. A prime example is Gary Noesner, the original FBI negotiator during the siege, who recounts his experience in his autobiography *Stalling for Time*. Noesner recalls an incident where Koresh wanted to talk about Revelation. This conversation alerted the FBI

negotiation team, making them remember the 1978 incident in Jonestown, Guyana, when Reverend Jim Jones's People's Temple coerced over 900 individuals to their deaths.

The team felt that the mention of Revelation conflated the Branch with this group as, according to Noesner, "The book of Revelation, with its focus on the apocalypse, could be a dangerous text in the hands of a charismatic and narcissistic leader."[93] However, when Koresh was asked directly about committing a Jonestown-style farewell statement followed by a mass suicide event, Koresh replied, "I'm not having anybody kill themselves."[94] This quote shows that the FBI was operating under the idea that the Branch was not only similar in actions and behavior to Jonestown but that Koresh was also a Jones-like figure in the mind of both the Hostage Rescue and negotiation teams, coercing his people into staying in the compound and preparing for mass suicide. This narrative was straightforward enough that David Thibodeau, in his autobiographical book *Waco: A Survivor's Story,* written alongside Leon Whiteson and Aviva Layton, recalled Koresh as "not charismatic in the manner of a Jim Jones or some television preachers." According to Thibodeau, he was not dignified or formal either; instead, he spoke fluently and was "never preachy, which would have been an instant turnoff."[95] These sentiments show the disconnect between viewpoints between Branch members in the Federal Government.

However, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya complicate this narrative in their chapter *Daddy Jones and Father Divine The Cult as Political Religion* in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America* stating*:*

> There is no parallel in American religious history for the final act of mass suicide in which hundreds of Jonestown believers participated, some of their own volition. Yet there is a certain irony in that the escalation of religious deviancy— or, if you prefer, the proliferation of alternative religious understandings in conventional American religious life— should have its most unfortunate expression in Guyana, an "undeveloped" community scarcely heard of in

> America. Certainly, America was hardly prepared to accept mass corporate ritual suicide at the behest of a self-appointed savior as a likely possibility in America. In the conventional American mind, such happenings could conceivably occur, of course, but they belonged to those back pages of the news routinely devoted to "exotic" behaviors in less sophisticated societies. Nevertheless, geography notwithstanding, the Jonestown happening was American— as American as Mother Ann Lee, or Elijah Muhammad, or Billy Graham.[96]

Lincoln and Mamiya's assessment of the tragedy that occurred at Jonestown and later Waco exposes the truth that most Americans and even Federal Law Enforcement felt new religious movements had a distinct level of abstraction and othering. This process was mainly centered around the idea that new religions are exotic and that their adherents are underdeveloped, deceived, or duped. It underscores a lack of agency for followers in these movements, reinforcing the idea that, in some ways, the adherents of Jonestown and Waco deserved what happened to them in the eyes of certain members of the public and government. After the fire at Mt. Carmel, President Bill Clinton stated on the White House Lawn: "Some religious fanatics murdered themselves," highlighting that the Branch was defined solely as aberrant even at the highest level of government.[97] The process of othering is compounded by the fact that both groups had a large percentage of their membership comprised of minorities, which only helped to solidify the perception that what the Branch represented was deviant. This perception would only worsen as the ATF began its criminal investigation.

Preparing for Showtime: Building the Case against the Branch

The Branch became a group of interest to the ATF in May of 1992 after Chief Deputy Sherrif Daniel Weyenberg of the McLennan County Sherriff's Department alerted the ATF to suspicious packages being delivered by the United Parcel Service (UPS) to the Mount Carmel Center in Waco. These packages contained several shipments of firearms valued over $10,000,

inert grenades, and a substantial amount of black powder, which, as the report states, can be combined with aluminum or magnesium powder, which were also items delivered to the compound, to create an enhanced explosive device.[98] The initial investigation contained the McLennan County Sherriff's department informing the ATF that Koresh and the Branch had a history of violence, alleging that Koresh had attempted to kill George Roden, the son of former Branch leaders Ben and Lois Roden, whom George felt usurped him by installing Koresh as the leader. This claim was further substantiated by the Sherriff's department providing an incident report detailing that they found Koresh and six other followers firing rifles at George Roden, who had received a minor gunshot wound before the Sherriff's intervention. It goes on to note that during the incident, Koresh and his followers were dressed in combat fatigues and camouflaged their faces with black grease paint.[99]

The decision to raid the compound was made after Special Agent Davy Aguilera had conducted an investigation that determined that despite neither being licensed firearms dealers or manufacturers nor having registered any National Firearms Act weapons, the Branch was in the process of converting semi-automatic rifles into automatic or "machineguns." Specifically, Aguilera notes that the Branch had received several M-16 machine gun CAR kits and M-16 machinegun E-2 kits, both referred to as conversion kits, meaning that when combined with the legal AR-15 lower receiver, the rifle is converted into a machine gun.[100] This revelation opened the case against the Branch with the allegations against them being the illegal manufacture of machineguns, the illicit manufacture and possession of destructive devices, including explosive bombs and grenades, and the material to produce such items. [101] Throughout the lead-up to the case, the ATF continually interviewed former members of the Branch. These interviews provided the ATF with the first indication of Koresh as a dominating presence in the compound and a

perpetrator of physical and sexual abuse of the children at Mount Carmel. The ATF summarizes these allegations: "… they showed Koresh to have set up a world of his own, where legal prohibitions were disregarded freely."[102] Chief among this development was that the ATF began interviewing Marc Breault, a former Branch member living in Australia who left the group 4 years before the investigation in 1989. Breault confirmed to the ATF that Koresh was the undisputed leader of the Branch and had frequent sex with minors. However, in affidavits corroborated by other former members of the Branch, the only abuse stated was harsh corporal punishment.[103] Nevertheless, former members' testimonies like Breault's formed the backbone of the ATF and the local Waco Tribune-Herald newspapers' opinion of Koresh and the Branch.

Tactical preparation began when the ATF found they had enough evidence to obtain a search warrant and a warrant to arrest Koresh, with the raid planned by various military and law enforcement experts. However, only William Buford, the resident agent in charge of the Little Rock ATF office, had experience of a raid of this magnitude, as Bufford was involved in the 1985 siege of the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord (CSA). The CSA was a Christian Identarian group that had a fortified compound in Arkansas that was raided for similar violations of firearms law. The siege lasted for three days and resulted in a successful negotiation, but by the time the CSA surrendered, many illegal firearms had been destroyed.[104] The destruction of evidence was one of the primary factors that led to the decision to attempt a rapid assault on the Mount Carmel Compound due to fears over the Branch destroying their illegal firearms. However, this rapid insertion of Federal agents also included the reality that the operation had a point of no return, as the compound's ground provided no cover for the Agents, meaning that once the front of the compound was reached, there was no way to abort the raid.[105]

Additionally, due to the allegations of sexual abuse of minors, the ATF contacted the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services, which had already assigned Joyce Sparks as a case worker due to prior anonymous reports of sexual misconduct. While Sparks visited the compound multiple times during 1992, she found no reliable evidence to indicate sexual misconduct, which she attributed to the Branch staging the compound to prevent suspicions during her visits, effectively making her visits heavily guided tours. However, Sparks corroborated that the Branch members were heavily armed and appeared to be preparing for an armed struggle.[106] David Block, who had been a Branch member from 1981 to 1992, further substantiated this claim and described the Branch as both modifying and producing firearms and having amassed a significant arsenal, including either a .50 caliber or .52 caliber rifle alongside approximately 15 AR-15s, and 25 AK-47s.[107] This building of the case spurred the ATF to establish an undercover house on January 11th and saw the installation of Special Agent Robert Rodriguez as an undercover agent.[108] In February of 1993, the ATF began a series of meetings with the Waco Tribune-Herald, which was preparing its *Sinful Messiah* series on the Branch. During these meetings, the ATF offered the Herald "front row seats" during the raid of the compound in exchange for the Herald delaying the publication of the *Sinful Messiah.*[109] However, the Herald published the first of the series, leading to a simultaneous demonization by the ATF and the local media on the day of the raid. While the narrative regarding the Branch was problematic, the *Treasury Report* clarifies that there was more than enough evidence for the ATF to conduct the raid. However, the execution of this raid and subsequent negotiation by the FBI is where the idea of the Branch as an aberrant cult backfired.

Bible Babble? New Religious Movements, Agency, Legitimacy, and the Sense of Embattlement

Scholars of religion James Tabor and Eugene Gallagher problematize this continual defining of the Branch as an unorthodox, violent, and abusive organization obsessively devoted to Koresh and deserving of the title of cult with the statement that:

> Koresh and his followers had been labeled a 'cult' and thoroughly 'demonized' in a series of articles called 'The Sinful Messiah' printed in the Waco Tribune-Herald beginning on February 27th, just one day before the BATF raid. This series, based largely on charges by disaffected former Branch Davidians, painted a grim and bizarre picture of Koresh and his followers, echoing all the stereotypes the public had come to associate with unfamiliar groups or new religious movements that are pejoratively labeled cults.[110]

The problem with the ATF and the Herald's narrative is twofold. First, the ATF and the Herald created a self-reinforcing prophecy that the Branch was not only a cult but aberrant and violent, leading to the only possibility being an armed raid of the compound and an unavoidable confrontation between the two groups. Second, the Branch never having any narrative agency helped lead to the 51-day standoff through apparent misunderstanding and obfuscation between the Branch and the ATF, and handing the standoff to the FBI only exacerbated the underlying issues. Specifically, the FBI began to play into the prophetic vision of the Branch as the evil federal government that had come to battle with the Branch.

The Justice Department Report on Waco titled *The United States Department of Justice Report on the Events at Waco, Texas, February 28th to April 19th, 1993,* offers some understanding of the FBI's mindset. The first mention of the Branch as an aberrant religion in the Justice Report appears on page 13, which states that the report will begin with a short history of the sect. This section mentions that the Branch is an offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination but does little to clarify why it labeled the Branch a sect. However, like in the *Treasury Report*, a footnote clarifies that the FBI considered the Branch a cult and conflated

them with the earlier siege of the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord. The footnote states: “Mr. Coulson noted that while Koresh’s group was not the first heavily armed cult that the FBI had encountered, the Waco situation was unique in that an assault by law enforcement had preceded negotiations with heavily armed cult members who had planned for a confrontation.”[111] Just as in *The Treasury Report*, *The Justice Report* labels the Branch an aberrant group with little clarity as to why this decision was made, reinforcing that the Branch was unsympathetic. The *Justice Report* also makes it apparent that the FBI viewed the Branch less as a religious group and more as a violent group akin to a militia like the far-right survivalist members of the Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord.

Sociologist James Richardson exemplifies this problem in his chapter of *Armageddon in Waco* titled “Manufacturing Consent about Koresh,” summarizing that “such pervasive anticult sentiment makes it easier to justify and defend the kinds of strategies implemented at Mt. Carmel. Indeed, such was essential to what happened, and grasping that fact makes the fiery holocaust itself more understandable.”[112] This statement means that by portraying the Branch as the “other,” the ATF was manufacturing a zero-sum game between Federal Law Enforcement and the Branch, forcing the construction that not only was the ATF the enemy of the Branch but moreover represented an existential threat to the Branch itself. Thus, while the Branch had many aspects traditionally associated with cults, federal law enforcement’s narrative construction of the Branch as a cult helped to solidify its image as an embattled group, which in part helped to escalate the violence during the siege.

Richardson’s work allows labeling theory to be applied to the Waco Siege. Labeling Theory, as formulated by sociologist Howard Becker, holds that deviance is a consequence of an external judgment that is in part formed out of labels like “cult,” “criminal,” or “mentally ill,”

which change not only the individual's self-perception but also the way others respond to a labeled person.[113] Becker's work was further developed into a modified labeling theory that rejects Becker's notion that labeling is the primary motivator of deviance but emphasizes that shame, stigma, and stereotyping are still a significant contributor to deviance.[114] Stigma is defined as the process in which human differences are distinguished and labeled, and this label is linked to undesirable characteristics or negative stereotypes. This label is then used to define the labeled as "them" rather than "us," leading to status loss and discrimination. Finally, this process is contingent on social, economic, and political power that allows for the identification of differentiation.[115] From this theoretical perspective, Waco was, in part, an example of how the label and stigma of the word "cult" helped to reinforce the perception of the Branch as deviant. This deviance helped in creating the worldview of the ATF and FBI by providing a self-fulfilling prophecy that the Branch was going to be a brainwashed violent group by deploying the cult label.

This self-fulfilling prophecy is apparent in David Thibodeau's memory of the events. In his book *Waco,* Thibodeau explains that all Branch commitments and beliefs were dismissed as "Bible babble."[116] Further, Thibodeau recounted that cult was a damning word that surfaced at the beginning of the drama and tainted everything that followed. For example, during the siege, a Methodist Minister named Joseph Bettis wrote to Attorney General Janet Reno that "from the beginning, members of the Cult Awareness Network have been involved in this tragedy. This organization is widely known for using fear to foster religious bigotry."[117] Nevertheless, the c-word continued to be used by the press, and the continued legacy of defining the Branch as a religious sect or cult.[118] In Thibodeau's mind, the name Branch Davidian might one day have become as unremarkable as "Mormon (Latter Day Saint)" or "Adventist," and Koresh would be

just another William Miller: "a patch in the crazy quilt that is American fundamentalism."[119] The connection to initially high-tension religion is noted in Thibodeau's memory. Thibodeau claims that Koresh left mainstream Seventh-day Adventism and joined the Branch movement as mainstream Seventh-day Adventism "offered a corrupted doctrine that betrayed its original purpose: to prophesy and prepare for the End Times and the coming of a Messiah. He had heard that Lois Roden had been given revelations from his aunt and others, and his hungry soul was ready to serve her."[120] This represents the desire for, as Stark and Finke describe, a particular high-tension religious experience, and not merely a high level of control.

The problem of the label "cult" is not to say that Koresh was blameless and not guilty of crimes. Followers like Thibodeau made it clear that Koresh did engage in underage sex, with Thibodeau stating that Koresh took children as young as 12 as "wives."[121] Thibodeau explains these relationships as being due to visions, not necessarily Biblical examples, but that "you could either consider David (Koresh) a vile seducer or a man following divine dictates. In a sense, both perceptions are equally valid: One man's prophet is another man's philander."[122] At the same time, the idea of aberration prevents either side of the Mt. Carmel siege from viewing each as full agents in the negotiation.

The negotiators dismissing David Koresh's communication as "Bible babble" is one example of this lack of agency. In *The Justice Report,* Murray Miron, a psycholinguist who was one of the experts employed by the FBI, stated, "The frequent Biblical references indicated to him that Koresh wished to confront and destroy the authorities whom Koresh referred to as the 'Babylonians' or 'Assyrians."[123] Miron did not believe that Koresh intended to give up or that Koresh was suicidal. Indeed, Miron hypothesized that Koresh's pathology left him functional enough to plan effectively and to vie against his adversaries. According to Miron, Koresh's

delusions were narrowly focused and limited to the "self-aggrandizements of his chosen status as God's hand."[124] Miron concluded his analysis of the letters given to the FBI from Koresh as follows: "In my judgment, we are facing a determined, hardened adversary who has no intention of delivering himself or his followers into the hands of his adversaries. It is my belief that he is waiting for an assault."[125] Marion further clarifies that Koresh's communication does not resemble the suicidal sermon made by Jim Jones in the last hours of Jonestown, stating, "His is not the language of those at Masada or Jonestown."[126] He intends to fight. Miron's assessment reveals two things. First, the FBI did not take Koresh's statements seriously, nor did they appear to understand the willingness to fight among the Branch members. However, it also reveals that there is substance to the idea that Koresh was delusional and was undoubtedly intent on violence but that Koresh was not an overwhelming figure like Charles Manson or Jim Jones. Instead, Koresh was not an immediate threat to those outside the compound until the siege on February 28th.

A further example of the lack of agency is that the FBI contacted Doctors of Theology Robert Wallace and John Fredericks, seeking their explanation of specific Biblical references that Koresh had made. Both individuals advised that the FBI consult with an expert in eschatology (the study of prophecy).[127] However, the FBI did not consider taking Wallace or Fredericks' advice in contacting experts like Phillip Arnold or James Tabor until late in the siege, presenting the notion that such a degree of understanding was unnecessary, thus eliminating the agency of the Branch to be understood in its terms and beliefs despite Branch member and number two to Koresh Steve Schneider being recorded as specifically requesting Phillip Arnold by name on March 16.[128] Had the FBI understood Koresh's eschatological ideas, informing his actions, they may have been able to de-escalate the violence.

The agency problem is best explained by conflict studies scholar Jayne Docherty's assessment in *Learning Lesson from Waco When the Parties Bring Their God to the Negotiation Table*. According to Docherty, the FBI's attempts to use biblical imagery and symbols in many ways backfired. This failure was due to the FBI's lack of knowledge about apocalyptic theology. It also implied to the Branch that the FBI was open to conversion to either the Branch's worldview or beliefs, with Koresh assuming that the FBI could be taught Branch theology.[129] Examples of this are the FBI's confusion over Koresh, calling them Babylonians or Assyrians, with Docherty finding that the FBI did not understand that the actions of the FBI were creating and reinforcing the idea that they were the enemy in the minds of the Branch.[130] The conflation of the FBI with Babylonians or Assyrians is explained by Branch member Clive Doyle in that he believes the Assyrians mentioned in the books of Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, and Zechariah to be the United Nations, but with the United States firmly behind it. Additionally, for Doyle, Babylon would arise from Assyria's judgment, resulting in a one-world government known as Babylon the Great, as it appears in Revelation chapters 17 and 18. This one-world government results in the Battle of Armageddon, with Doyle concluding that the millennium occurs only after the last battle, explaining "That the battle is the last gap of those who want to resist God's plan and way of salvation."[131] This explanation by Doyle portrays the mindset of Branch members during the siege as being in conflict with this new world order.

Doyle's understanding emphasizes that the FBI took no care in understanding the worldmaking of the Branch. For Docherty, one example of this problem in de-escalation during the 51-day siege is that law enforcement agencies operated under the cultural framework where reason and emotion are mutually exclusive.[132] Reducing individual Branch members to mere pawns demonstrated that the Waco siege was a combat between two worlds of meaning with no

attempt to build a bridge between the two parties. Docherty explains that unconventional or new religious movements often conduct worldmaking by emphasizing their separation from those that do not share their vision, values, and beliefs, defining both a "we" and a "them" through this act of separatism.[133] One of the major breakdowns of the worldview coordination that Docherty describes was the commodification of adult women. Specifically, it appears that the FBI assigned little agency to these women, viewing them only as bargaining chips rather than individuals. Docherty found that Koresh and the other Branch members considered them to be in control of their narratives and agency. In the Branch's view, the adult women were "moral agents," with the battle between obeying God's commands or the demands of the secular authorities. Thus, commodifying women as bargaining chips was deeply offensive to the Branch. It also implied that someone inside Mt. Carmel had the power to trade the individuals inside, reinforcing that Koresh kept individuals as hostages rather than individuals staying or leaving of their own free will.[134]

An example is Sheila Martin, who survived the fire as she left on March 21. She was the wife to Wayne Martin, a Harvard-trained lawyer who made one of the initial 911 calls that brokered the ceasefire between the Branch and the ATF. Martin recounted her experiences in *When They Were Mine Memoir of a Branch Davidian Wife and Mother*. Martin claims, "On March 20, Steve Scheider said it would be our last Sabbath together. He said we were all going to move off Mount Carmel a few at a time. Everyone was supposed to leave eventually." Martin adds, "I went out on March 21st. I believed I was coming back."[135] Thus, while Martin remained faithful to the Branch, she also left based on her own volition.

However, despite individuals leaving, Noesner explains the rationale of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team in response to Koresh with Hostage Rescue Team leader Dick Rogers

stating, “This joker is screwing with us. It’s time to teach him a lesson. My people can get in there and secure that place in fifteen minutes.”[136] Jack Jamar, head of the FBI’s operation, countered, “Still too soon for that, but I agree it’s time to teach Koresh a lesson.”[137] The negotiation team resisted both, stating they could get negotiations with Koresh and the Branch back on track. This lesson in aggression included moving M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles on the Mount Carmel Property, which angered the Branch with Steve Schneider stating, “Honestly, we were going to come out, but what could we do? God told David to wait.”[138] Noesner says that “our continuing show of force had failed to make Koresh more compliant and had made him angry enough to break off contact.”[139] The lack of understanding of Branch member’s agency is also seen in Noesner’s analysis of Schneider, which refers to Schneider’s wife Judy as Koresh’s concubine, with Noesner claiming that one of the reasons this did not bother Steve because “it would require that Schneider had reserved some of his mind for independent thought.”[140] Noesner concluded that Koresh’s theology rapidly adapted to serve Koresh’s purposes. Noesner said, “If there had ever been any doubt, this persuaded us that arguing religion with Koresh would only be a fool’s game. Koresh was only using religion primarily to manipulate and control others.”[141] Eliminating any basis for mutual understanding.

In the FBI’s mind, the Branch was comprised of duped people who submitted to Koresh in total submission without any reference to deeply and legitimately held beliefs. The idea of brainwashing, which stemmed from ex-Branch members and was not corroborated by anyone who survived the fire, is evident in the quote by Noesner that Steve Schneider, even as the number two to David Koresh, had no room for independent thought and was merely following whatever Koresh commanded. This mindset resulted in the tragedy of April 19th and left a stain on federal law enforcement and the United States Government as it limited not only negotiations

with the Branch but also how many people came out of Mt. Carmel during the 51 days. Considering this, Noesner's final assessment is apt. After being taken off the negotiation team, Noesner recalls his experience of the final day of the 51-day siege: "As I watched, I wonder how the Davidians could see this as anything other than an assault." Noesner concludes, "Waco was a self-inflicted wound that would take years to heal."[142] This wound served in part as the catalyst for the association between Waco and the radical right to which I now turn.

The Fire of Rage: How the Waco Siege became a rallying point for the Radical Right

While the ATF helped to construct the Branch into its legacy as a violent cult, the radical right made a further construction to the legacy of Waco in the wake of the end of the siege on April 19th that ended with David Koresh and other members of the Branch perishing in a fire. The Branch was a diverse group: around half of the membership was international, 36 percent were Black or African American, and 20 percent were Asian or Latinx.[143] Despite this reality, the radical right adopted the legacy of Waco as their own. This idea stems from political scientist Ashley Jardina's idea in *White Identity Politics* that white racial solidarity is generated by significant events that create a mass understanding of a threat. For this threat to forge a mass-level identity, this threat must be "prevalent, identifiable, and significant."[144] These events create what Jardina calls white racial solidarity, which Jarinda defines as a "social identity where those who identify with the group are motivated to protect its collective interests."[145] This corresponds to Docherty, who describes Waco as a critical incident which, according to the Critical Incident Analysis Group, is an event "that has the potential for causing personal trauma and undermining social trust, creating fear that may have an impact on community life and even on the practice of democracy."[146]

As a critical incident, Waco changed how many individuals continue to view unconventional religious communities and shaped how society views the power of law enforcement agencies and the role of the Federal Government's interaction with religion and religious freedom.[147] Suddenly, the idea that a "church" could come under siege, even in the highly religious state of Texas, represented an existential threat to some who had been preparing for a conflict with the government, stoking their fears as the siege played out on television. A young man modeled this perception by standing on a hill overlooking Mt. Carmel, selling bumper stickers with the slogan "Is your church ATF approved?" This man was Timothy McVeigh, who would retaliate for what he had witnessed at Waco two years later by committing the Oklahoma City Bombing as a member of multiple white supremacist groups. McVeigh primarily viewed this bombing as an act of preserving the white race, as will be explored in the next Chapter.[148] Docherty explains that the media, federal authorities, and society privileged the secular-scientific symbolic world during the siege, with Docherty stating, "So unbalanced was the power to define the world that some observers have cited Waco as evidence of the government's outright hostility to religion."[149] Helping to create the idea that, in part, Waco was a battle over understanding religious liberty.

However, Waco did not happen in a vacuum. On August 21st, 1992, only six months before the Waco incident, the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team engaged in a standoff with Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, over the distribution of illegal firearms, in this case sawed-off shotguns. Docherty explains that the Weaver Case weighed heavily on the Branch's perception of the federal government. Ruby Ridge worsened an already lowered view of government among the Branch as the evidence is that Schneider, Koresh, and other Branch members had begun combining elements of various conspiracy theories with their apocalypticism. [150] As Docherty

states, most millennial communities merely act on themes that originated in mainstream culture.[151] However, according to Thibodeau, Randy Weaver and his Christian Identarian ideals were neither admired nor emulated by the Branch. Thibodeau describes Weaver as a separatist tainted by anti-Semitic rhetoric and associations with the violent Aryan Nations movement. However, despite being repulsed by his theologies and actions, Thibodeau claims that "the violent way in which he'd been dealt with was an ominous portent; our community also lived by beliefs that mainstream society might not tolerate forever." Thibodeau further explains that the Branch felt Ruby Ridge mirrored what could happen to them, stating, "Also, we were troubled by the government's use of all the machinery of military aggression- including snipers, concealed video cameras, planes, and armed helicopters- against a family with four children. That this could happen in America to Americans sent a collective chill down our spines."[152] David Koresh responded to Ruby Ridge by asking, "Is it a dress rehearsal for an attack on Mount Carmel?"[153] This provides more evidence that Federal Law Enforcement's actions were interpreted as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This connection between Waco and Ruby Ridge is also present in Noesner's assessment of David Koresh, with him conflating the Branch with the Weavers, "Like Vicki Weaver, the Davidians believed in the book of Revelation's prophecies that the forces of evil will be unleashed during the end times, and the righteous will have to do battle with them."[154] The case's aftermath resulted in a kind of bunker mentality over certain aspects of both the case and the raid. Noesner was surprised that Dick Rodgers was still in command of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team despite the debacle in Idaho at Ruby Ridge, with Noesner assuming that frocking Rodgers would have been an "admission of the gross errors of judgment that had taken place concerning Idaho."[155] Thus, Ruby Ridge had already inflamed anti-government activists of the

radical right, but Waco raised it to a fever pitch. It created fertile ground for recruitment and instilling white racial solidarity among the various groups of white nationalists, particularly the burgeoning militia movement around the idea that religion and firearms were under threat. These militias had begun symbolically linking the religious nature of the Waco siege to ideas that whiteness was also under attack, with these ideas central to the next Chapter.

However, to conclude, the reality of Waco is that various parties have socially constructed its legacy, and this fact begs a return to dictionary definitions, just as the ATF deployed in its report in defining the Branch as a cult, as the conclusion is that Waco was an apocalypse. Nevertheless, the term apocalypse itself has multiple meanings, just as different narratives have tried to paint Waco as "a prophetic revelation, especially concerning a cataclysm in which the forces of good permanently triumph over the forces of evil," yet the reality is that the legacy of Waco is more aptly defined as, "any universal or widespread destruction or disaster."[156] In not understanding the worldview of the Branch, the Federal Government only exasperated the problems of Waco, leading to it becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy on both sides. Thus, while it is evident that Waco's legacy is vital for understanding critical aspects of contemporary radical politics and religion, many questions remain around what the construction of the Branch as a definer of white identity means for the future of white Christian nationalism and its implications for American democracy. The next Chapter turns to how Waco became a symbol that created cascading violence to answer this question.

Chapter Three: The Final Battle: Waco, White Christian Nationalism, and the Fate of Democracy

Regarding white terrorism and violence, Waco changed everything. As criminologist Mark Hamm states in *Apocalypse in Oklahoma*, from 1987 to 1992, there were no incidents of

right-wing domestic terrorism in the United States, a period of dormancy after the arrests of members of radical groups, including the Order and The Covenant, The Sword, and the Arm of the Lord. However, after the events of Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco in 1993, this changed completely.[157] Hamm documented that before Waco, bomb threats against federal buildings were rare. After Waco, there were more than thirty a day.[158] While earlier groups were organized around ideologies such as neo-Nazism or Christian Identity, a new wave of radicalism emerged, with deep-seated anger against the federal government.[159]

This white anger boiled over on April 19, 1995, as Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols exacted, in their words, revenge for Ruby Ridge and Waco by detonating a bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. McVeigh stated that, without Waco, there would have been no motive to bomb the building.[160] The attack on the building was directly drawn from William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*, a book in which white nationalists overthrow the United States government in an apocalyptic battle for "the good of the white race." In many ways, this is a racialized version of the worldbuilding explored in Chapter One in that McVeigh felt it was not Christians that were the chosen remnant but rather the white race.

Hamm states that McVeigh had come to see the fate of the world through an apocalyptic lens, creating a link in his mind between his racial animosity and his hatred of the government, with *The Turner Diaries* serving as McVeigh's blueprint for the future.[161] Thus, in McVeigh, the apocalyptic imagination had moved from an answer to questions of worldmaking, agency, and legitimacy to the idea of anger and violence. This framework of apocalyptic notions of anger and violence and how it influences white Christian nationalism will be the focus of this Chapter. This Chapter argues that Waco created a symbolic legitimacy for violence that, while particularly salient in the 90s, has continued into the present.

Hamm demonstrates the white racial solidarity developed from Waco by finding that radical right publications like *Taking Aim,* the newsletter of the Militia of Montana, held April 19th as a sacred day, with the militia's founder conflating the end of the siege of the Branch with the start of the Revolutionary War, Ruby Ridge, and the Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord founder Richard Snell's execution date. This statement shows that April 19th had become a day representing the struggle for freedom for various members of the radical right. The execution of Richard Snell coincided with the Oklahoma City Bombing on April 19th, 1995, marking another aspect of the day as a symbol for the radical right. The symbolic association with April 19th can also be seen in tributes to Waco, as returning to the monument at Mt. Carmel in the center lies a plague designating Mount Carmel Center, which states, "On April 19th, 1993, the Davidians and their church were burned to the ground. Eighty-two people perished during the siege; 18 were ten years old or younger." The Northeast Texas Regional Militia donated this memorial, underscoring the narrative that began to be spun about Waco that not only did the Federal Government kill the Branch members, but militias began to form to prevent this from ever happening again.

However, some members of the Branch met the conflation between the radical right and the Waco Siege with uneasiness. In the aftermath of Waco, Branch member David Thibodeau describes that he had difficulty with the politics of the audiences who most wanted to hear him speak. The people who seemed most interested in listening were from the assorted "patriot" community, primarily individuals who feel strongly that the government has far too often abused its power. Thibodeau found these people range from working class to militia members, coopting the Waco tragedy into their lexicon as a prime example of the government exceeding its authority.[162] Included in these speaking engagements was a meeting with members of the

Michigan Militia at one of several Preparedness Expos that Thibodeau and other Mount Carmel survivors attended. Thibodeau recounted that Mark, a member of this militia, railed against all "pinko-liberal" gun control advocates.[163] Highlighting firearms as a key aspect of the legacy of Waco.

Thibodeau concluded that these guys mean business, which he felt was chilling and exhilarating.[164] Odiously, the Michigan Militia was the paramilitary organization that both Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were associated with, availing that Thibodeau's feelings that "these guys were serious" was prophetic as McVeigh and Nichols were preparing to perform the worst act of domestic terrorism in the history of the United States. However, while these militiamen were in Thibodeau's mind, rightwing radicals far too extreme for his views, they seemed to be the only Americans willing to hear what Thibodeau had to say. Thibodeau went as far as to state, "The best of the patriots, I felt, were struggling to rethink their identity as Americans and, like me, were genuinely scared by what happened at Mount Carmel. But Mount Carmel was about Scripture, not politics, and I knew it was a perversion for it to become symbolic for the wrong reasons and cause."[165] From this, the legacy of Waco had begun to be redefined from the problems of limited agency that only intensified the standoff between the Branch and federal agencies to a mobilizer for the radical right, symbolizing the overreach of the government and justification for more violent actions to, in their words, avenge what happened at Waco.

They Shall Be Avenged when Symbols Become Deadly: The Oklahoma City Bombing

The 'avenging' of Waco was most clearly seen in the Oklahoma City Bombing, a tragic case of domestic terrorism inspired by the events of Ruby Ridge and the Waco siege. However,

in understanding the legitimation of this level of violence, it is essential to understand the worldview of the perpetrators of the bombing, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, particularly whether their worldview contained elements of religious and active apocalypticism by using their motives to further understand how the radical right and, by extension, white Christian nationalism behaves like a new religious movement.

It is imperative to understand that McVeigh and accomplice Nichols were influenced by Ruby Ridge and Waco and a book called The *Turner Diaries*. J.M Berger's article *The Turner Legacy* introduces *The Turner Diaries* as the progenitor of at least 200 murders and 40 terrorist attacks or hate crimes, making it one of the most successful drivers of violent actions amongst the far-right in the United States.[166] Berger points out that dystopian fiction has often been a vehicle for political propaganda and that a near future setting is helpful for incitement and persuasion, with the connection with McVeigh being the book was his constant companion. [167] When McVeigh left the Army in 1992, disaffected and depressed, the book came with him. He traveled the country, selling various wares at gun shows. Stacks of the red-covered tome were always for sale on his table, and he was always available to start a conversation about the text.[168] In this way, *The Turner Diaries* became the Bible for McVeigh, with him becoming the prophet for its apocalyptic vision spurred by a revolution stemming from the confiscation of guns, which Bergers describes as a paranoid fear that has not ebbed over time.[169] While it should be noted that William Pierce, author of the book, and his organization, the National Alliance, were neither a part of Christian Identity nor did they present themselves as a Christian organization, many of Pierce's close associates were involved with religious justifications for racism.[170] Pierece's connections and actions show the significant theme of how religion was used even by "secular" or "cultural" members and organizations of the radical right.

In examining the text of *The Turner Diaries*, one finds Pierce uses religious and racist symbolism to significant effect in his book. In the forward of the book, the reader is introduced to the fictional history of the "Great Revolution" through the "diaries" of Earl Turner, whose name is inscribed in "The Record of Martyrs."[171] The book opens on September 16th, 1991, with the declaration that "we are at war with the system, and it is no longer a war of words." Spurred by an event called the gun raids that resulted from the fictional Cohen Act that outlawed all private ownership of firearms, Turner joined a group known as the Organization that sought to fight the System and impose a white ethnostate.[172] This section demonstrates the power of creating conflict between a "good and righteous us" and "a villainous and faceless them."

As the story progresses, the fictional account finds Turner developing a bomb that will be detonated in an FBI building, with Turner stating that "either George or Henry, probably Henry, will drive the truck into the freight receiving area inside the FBI building. If we're lucky, that will be the end of the FBI building- and the government's new three-billion-dollar computer for their internal passport system.[173] In this blueprint to the Oklahoma City Bombing, Pierce writes Turner's point of view of the necessity of this violence: "If the Organization fails in its task now, *everything* will be lost- our history, our heritage, all the blood and sacrifices and upward striving of countless thousands of years. The Enemy we are fighting fully intends to destroy the racial basis of our existence."[174] Turner's justification then takes an unexpected turn by declaring, "If we fail, God's great Experiment will come to an end, and this planet will once again, as it did millions of years ago, move through the ether devoid of higher man."[175] In just thirty-five pages, Pierce has instructed the reader that violence is a necessity to preserve one's very existence in the drapery of the symbols of anti-government sentiment, the fear of losing firearms, racial resentment, and, ultimately, the idea that God has divinely ordained this path. This path of

violence is described in the book as killing 700 people in the Organization's terrorist attack on an FBI building. Perhaps what is most striking is that the book states that 150 people were killed during the explosion in the sub-basement, paralleling the real toll of 168 people who lost their lives due to McVeigh and Nichol's emulation of this book.[176]

Continuing a reign of terror, Turner explains that the goal of political terrorism is "to force authorities to make reprisals and to become more repressive, thus alienating a portion of the population and generating sympathy for the terrorists."[177] Written fifteen years before Waco, Pierce's writing demonstrates how the radical right interpreted and redefined the legacy of Waco's self-fulfilling prophecy by uplifting the siege as an example of oppression and alienation by the government, with this being used to generate sympathy for terrorism that Pierce and others in the radical right desired. Returning to the text, Turner concludes his thesis on political terrorism by stating, "And the other purpose is to create unrest by destroying the population's sense of security and their belief in the invincibility of the government."[178] These two quotes highlight the idea of cascading violence through reactionary reinterpretation and active participation in violence, as beyond giving a model for individuals like McVeigh, the notion that terrorism is meant to disrupt notions of security and invincibility in the government is an essential step in understanding how acts like the Oklahoma City Bombing became legitimized as the proper course of action. This legitimation of violence is not isolated to individuals like McVeigh, as the next attack was on the Capitol. Through a combined bombing of a carport and mortar fire, this act of terrorism was meant to exact a toll on the symbol of "tyranny and treason."[179] A comparison of this event in the book and the January 6th insurrection has been drawn with Vox reporter Aja Romano stating, "*The Turner Diaries* ends with a violent terrorist coup against the US government, not unlike the January 6th Capitol insurrection."[180] These

political symbols give a clear indication to the reader that violence is not only justified to bring about the world that Pierce and his fellow white nationalists desire but also necessary, giving an apocalyptic fatalism to Pierce's end goals.

However, beyond being a political blueprint, *The Turner Diaries* also presents a worrisome picture of how Christianity is symbolically used to align the goals of the Organization with religious fervor. For example, Turner recounts that among members of the Organization, "The Christians are a mixed bag. Some of them are the most devoted and courageous members. Their hatred of the System is based on- their recognition of the System's role in undermining and perverting Christendom," with the supposed perversion being a Jewish takeover of Christianity through the promotion of racial equality.[181] Turner also repeats the earlier sentiment that the white race is God's chosen experiment by declaring, "We are truly the instruments of God In the fulfillment of His Grand Design."[182] These religious symbols are meant to have the reader understand that true Christianity and the fulfillment of God's plan is whiteness, a particular state of being chosen that the faithful must fight to preserve. A dangerous conflation of white identity with Christianity underscores how Pierce knew that religion was a powerful symbolic motivator and was critical to supporting his ideas.

Further religious symbols are developed throughout the book; as Turner progresses in the Organization, he becomes a part of the secretive leadership known as the Order. As explained by Turner, "We are the bearers of the Faith. Only from our ranks will the future leaders of the Organization come."[183] In joining the Order, Turner describes his experience as a born-again moment, stating, "Now our lives truly belong only to the Order. Today, I was, in a sense, born again. I know now that I will never again be able to look at the world or the people around me or my own life in quite the same way I did before."[184] The book concludes with an apocalyptic

nuclear strike that results in the success of the Organization in establishing its ethnostate and the systematic extermination of anyone labeled non-white. Thus creating, in Pierce's mind, a white utopia out of the ashes of the United States with the book closing with the line, "the Organization would achieve its worldwide political and military goals, and that the Order would spread its wise and benevolent rule over the earth for all time to come."[185] A kind of white millennialism and apocalypticism that can only be brought about through violence and hate.

From understanding the text, *The Turner Diaries* presents a terrifying apocalyptic version of the future that, in some ways, resonates with a more secular white supremacist vision of Hal Lindsey's version of the apocalypse with peace only established through nuclear exchange. In that, as Lindsey states, "The doctrine of premillennialism means that Jesus Christ must return at a time of global holocaust to rescue His people and establish an earthly kingdom for them of 1,000 years duration."[186] From the text, it appears evident that for McVeigh, this idea of the holocaust meant either attempting to spur the events of the *Diaries* himself, preventing what he saw as the future destruction of the white race, or accepting the perceived defeat of his entire worldview. Citing sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer, Berger explains that the common theme of this literature is the concept of cosmic war. Berger states, "In the case of white nationalism, the "white race" is threatened with extinction due to widespread miscegenation and the erosion of white supremacist social norms. As Juergensmeyer notes, *The Turner Diaries* is an exemplary proponent of the white nationalist conception of this "cosmic war."[187] Thus, if this cosmic war seems plausible to the reader, the result is the stimulation of the symbols of religious apocalyptic belief, even if the reader has no religious ideology, imbuing the reader with existential stakes about the future.[188] Waco served as the catalyst for action and the stark reminder that this coming calamity was not only authentic but also rapidly approaching in the minds of individuals like

McVeigh. The implication is that apocalyptic visions of books like *The Turner Diaries* allowed McVeigh to recruit and spread his vision not as a member of a particular organization but as a client of multiple radical groups.

This sentiment was captured in the aftermath of the bombing when the Dallas Morning News interviewed surviving Branch members for their reactions during the second-anniversary memorial at Mount Carmel. Clive Doyle stated, “We don’t condone this bombing in any way. We don’t have any ill wills or plans for revenge.” Thibodeau responded, “The media and everyone are tying us to this bombing in Oklahoma. Hey, there’s no link, guys. We had nothing to do with this.” However, during the memorial for Branch members, Thibodeau asked the crowd, including many militia members, “When they come to your door, are you going to fight or just roll over?” To which someone from the group responded, “Give them the lead first.”[189] Exposing that McVeigh’s views were not merely isolated to him.

Nevertheless, in the years after the bombing, some far-right sources like “The Jubilee” newspaper tried to paint Timothy McVeigh as a scapegoat with the July/August 1997 issue calling McVeigh a blood sacrifice that damaged the reputation of militias. In effect, the Oklahoma City Bombing represented the apex of the militia movement. As the 21st century began, much of the anger was moved from an internal enemy in the federal government and placed upon an external enemy in the form of radical Islamic terror. Data from the Center for Strategic & International Studies shows that between the years 1994 and 2000, far-right terror averaged around twenty-three incidents a year. However, between 2001 and 2014, this fell to approximately nine incidents yearly. However, after 2014, violence by the far-right rose sharply, surpassing even the apex year of 1995. Between 2015 and 2021, the new average became over 38 incidents per year, with 2020 alone having seventy-three incidents, dwarfing the forty-two

incidents in 1995.[190] The question for the rest of the Chapter is how the violent rhetoric of the 90s justified violence and what this rhetoric says about why violence is more common today.

Audience: How White Christian Nationalism Operates Like a New Religious Movement

To examine the problem of violence, the idea of how disparate identities can coalesce around critical incidents like Waco is paramount. The framework for understanding how the radical right in the 90s and white Christian nationalism today used these incidents builds upon the understanding of NRMs presented in the Intro and First Chapter. In addition to understanding the fourfold definition of NRMs (High-Tension, Radical New/Novel Interpretation, Apocalyptic as Central, Active Apocalyptic view), it is crucial to know how these movements grow and evolve. To do this, I use the threefold process described in *The Future of Religion* by sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, which describes the legitimation process of new religious movements as occurring in three parts. These stages are the audience stage, the client stage, and the movement stage.[191] For Stark and Bainbridge, most religious movements begin at the audience stage, defined as a religious group with little to no formal organization that mainly interacts through media such as books, magazines, television, or, more recently, new media like social networks or YouTube.[192] Once a movement spreads through the media, it arrives at the client stage; at this point, the organization pattern resembles a therapist and patient. little structure exists, but a leadership that partially mobilizes a base is formed.[193] The last step is creating a movement where the partial mobilization of the client stage becomes fully operationalized and organized, becoming a fully formed religious organization.[194] While Stark and Bainbridge's trifurcation of new religious movements helps us understand how religious movements evolve, it also demonstrates levels of engagement with these movements. These

engagement levels allow us to understand white Christian nationalism as a new religious movement by using audience, client, and movement as barometers for how individuals engage with the ideology by using the rhetoric that emerged after Waco to examine these engagement levels.

This idea corresponds with psychologist Pamela Cooper-White's notion in her book The *Psychology of Christian Nationalism* in that organizations affiliated with white Christian nationalism exhibit NRM-like features as they become more extreme and adopt conspiracy theories.[195] It also resonates with how Jayne Docherty found that the Branch had begun to adopt conspiracies that pushed them further toward violence. An example of this is that one of the many predecessors to white Christian nationalism exists as a new religious movement, as Christian Identity specifically evolved out of British Israelism and other emergent religions. Hamm calls Christian Identity a theology that divinely sanctions racism, and its origins stem from the idea that Jews are the spawn of Satan and white "Aryans" are the descendants of the tribes of Israel, making them God's chosen people. Chief among this theology is the idea that a final apocalyptic battle is coming that will see the white race battle with the Jews.[196] Historian of religion Phillip Jenkins in *Mystics and Messiahs* recounts that Christian Identity is an explicitly racial religious movement that made strides in the 1960s with the emergence of groups like the Aryan Nations, The Church of Jesus Christ-Christian, the Christian Defense League, and the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord. Today Christian Identity remains prominent among Neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, survivalists, and militia members, mainly as an audience-level movement meant to give a "racialized protestant theology" to their belief.[197] Demonstrating how religious and apocalyptic beliefs reinforce these extremist ideologies by providing certainty through the idea that white people are the chosen race, they legitimize their hatred of minorities

through the symbols of Christianity. While Christian Identarians are regulated to the more radical ends of politics, culture, and religion, understanding the connection between their aggressive beliefs and practices and NRMs is vital to understanding the aftermath of Waco and the violence of the present day, as these groups were among the first to support the Branch and construct the legacy of Waco to fit their narrative. I now turn to the history of how Waco became a symbol of religious liberty and firearms that legitimized and galvanized these radical identities.

My God shall not be mocked: Waco as Symbol of Religious Liberty

In portraying Waco as a symbol of the battle over ideas of religious liberty, it is essential to note that pilgrimages to the Mt. Carmel site started almost immediately after the FBI left. A news article titled *Pilgrimages to Waco cult site don't Surprise Lone Resident* details how Amo Bishop Roden, who was married to Ben and Lois Roden's son George, witnessed visitors to the site of Mt. Carmel. Roden recounts that many women cry here, cementing the remains of Mt. Carmel as a site of tragedy, a reaction that she felt would be similar to when they erected a monument to the Oklahoma City bombing. Roden expressed that she was not surprised at McVeigh and Nichols's actions as she felt that the Waco tragedy stirred a small but passionate subset of American individuals that Roden saw daily. Roden described three types of people who came to the remains of Mount Carmel. One type was comprised of mere tourists who wanted to visit the site. The second type came because they considered the area a religious shrine, and the last type came because it was a political shrine. Roden explains that for some, Mt. Carmel represented the place that symbolized diminishing civil rights, civil liberties, and constitutional rights. Citing Iriwin Suall of the Anti-defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the article explains that "It's (Waco) the single most repeated theme used by militia organizers to show that the

government is at war with anyone who won't kowtow to it"—demonstrating that for many in the radical right, Waco had become a symbol of religious liberty beyond merely a symbol of government overreach.[198] With the Branch seen as martyrs for this cause, these organizations began to sanctify the remains of Mt. Carmel. This consecration of Mt. Carmel served as a critical move for these organizations as Waco became a place to visit to solidify their worldview of being under siege.

Furthering this connection, an article in the August 1997 issue of the Christian Identity group The Christian Defense League's newspaper, "The CDL Report," titled *Waco is Still Burning*, shows how some Christian Identarians viewed Ruby Ridge and Waco. The article states, "The rules of engagement were an FBI fiction cooked up to justify the murder raid on the Christian Weaver family at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992."[199] Two keys to this statement are the words murder and Christian casting the FBI as violent rogue agents that killed members of the CDL's ingroup. The article continues, "The worst was yet to come. In early 1993, hordes of heavily armed Federal Bureau of Investigation and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agents descended upon a small Christian church near Waco, Texas." The article concludes, "We will never forget Waco. Unavenged, it remains the greatest stain on our national honor. It is the epitome of government terrorism, the same type of terrorism carried out by Josef Stalin and his Bolshevik cohorts when they massacred one million Christians each year from 1917 to 1967."[200] The Christian Defense League's framing of Waco and Ruby Ridge shows not only the construction of these events as a call to arms but also that in groups like the CDL, the Weaver family, and the Branch members were adopted as part of their ingroup. Ignoring the reality of whether these groups expressed similar beliefs, this article shows that religion remained a chief

unifier of identity, with these attacks seen as attacks not due to firearm violations but on religious freedom.

However, Christian Identitarians were not the only believers who viewed Waco in this light. In 1999, a prominent member of the Christian right, Pat Robertson, interviewed Mike McNulty on The Christian Broadcast Network about his film "Waco: A New Revelation," which, amongst other ideas, presents the conspiracy that American special forces, in particular Delta Force, were active during the Waco siege. However, Robertson reveals his feelings about Waco by stating:

> Ladies and gentlemen, whatever we may have thought about David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, and I certainly don't agree with any of their theology, but nevertheless, in a free society, people have a right to differing points of view and differing lifestyles. And if we bring down the FBI and The Delta Force and the power of the government and burn out people we disagree with or if we assassinate them as we did Randy Weaver's wife on Ruby Ridge, then we are in danger of losing our freedoms, and that's why this is a very important matter, and somebody should pay the price for this kind of thing. This was the premeditated murder of innocent women and children.[201]

Roberston's comment gives a broader legitimacy to the idea that Waco was a battle not over illegal activities but over religious freedom and liberty, even in the minds of those neither affiliated with radical organizations like Christian Identity nor even non-traditional religious organizations. While in the case of Ruby Ridge and the Weaver family, there is a case to be made that ingroup identity was easy to construct through Randy Weaver's association with Christian Identity groups and militias, Robertson's defense of the Branch seems more complicated to justify. This distance in beliefs shows how even more mainstream religious organizations felt that Waco symbolized a threat to them and their ideas of the relationship between church and state. The rhetoric of

"someone should pay the price for this kind of thing" is harrowing as it was the same ideal that legitimized the actions of McVeigh and Nichols three years prior.

A further connection between Waco and mainstream evangelical organizations is seen in a January 19, 1994 letter. Bill Bell, the correspondent assistant to James Dobson at Focus on the Family, responded to Pam Hawkins about receiving her letters of concern regarding Waco. Bell stated, "We want you to know how much we appreciate the tape you sent to our ministry and the quality manner in which you raised unanswered questions about the events surrounding the fire at the Branch's compound near Waco. The interview and song you recorded touched us deeply."[202] Pam Hawkins served as the chairperson of the Mount Carmel Independent Investigation Advocates, also titled the Citizens United to Reverse the Erosion of Civil Liberties. In a letter published by the organization after the Oklahoma City Bombing, Hawkins states:

> Whether the Bombing in Oklahoma City was a revenge bombing as we are being conditioned to believe, or whether it was the work of skilled, practiced agents who wished to derail or divert attention from the impending civil suits and congressional hearings while, as Mark England put it to me, rehabilitating the image of the FBI. Whether the orders came from an embattled president whose greatest threat is the truth and an informed public or anything in between, it can hardly be denied that the tragedies of Mount Carmel and Oklahoma City are somehow linked. That being the case, we must face the fact that had the Mount Carmel tragedy been properly addressed early on, the tragedy in Oklahoma City could have been avoided.[203]

Hawkins's letter and statement reveal the idea that organizations like Focus on the Family were at least perceived as being friendly or receptive to the notion that Waco was an attack on religion. Like Robertson, Hawkings viewed the events of Waco as justifying the course of action to take revenge. While this is not to say that individuals like Pat Robertson or Pam Hawkins condoned the Oklahoma City bombing, it gives evidence for how beliefs in justifying violent actions emerge, like Stark and Bainbridge's assessment of audience movements. These ideas spread through the media and required little

organization despite the evidence that they spread to countercultural and more mainstream religious organizations.

A final example of how Waco changed perceptions about religious liberty is an article entitled *Religious Liberty in Crisis* by William Norman Grigg, an editor for the John Birch Society. Grigg states, "Recent developments - the Waco bloodletting being the most prominent example - suggest the federal government and its apologists are developing a similar (in reference to China) hostility to those who believe in a source of authority beyond the state."[204] In Griggs, we find the idea that not only was Waco an attack on religious freedom but an omen of the installation of a state religion hostile to the very conception of religious liberty. Grigg continues, "Of course, the Waco bloodletting illustrates the fact that there is no refuge in isolation for those found guilty of practicing unsanctioned religions. President Bill Clinton, vicar of the civil religion and mediator of the 'New Covenant,' saw the immolation of the Branch as an object lesson about the dangers of politically incorrect religion."[205] Griggs' comment centers the issue of Waco to be the possibility that religious freedom was being curtailed and that the government had become the arbiter of belief. Griggs not only conflates Waco with these ideals but also President Clinton as a chief threat who happily saw the deaths of Branch members. Thus, it demonstrates how religious themes were present across a myriad of sources when defining the legacy of Waco, giving credence to the notion of audience-style movements being able to influence and infiltrate mainstream and radical cultures, driving interpretations and symbolic associations with events.

Rods of Iron: The Legacy of Waco and the Symbol of Firearms

Another major issue surrounding Waco was the centrality of firearms during the raid, with many of the reactions availing not only political concern regarding the Second Amendment but also a kind of consecration of weapons. The September 1st, 1997, issue of the "New American," a right-wing magazine owned by the John Birch Society, warned its readers, "Waco was not an aberration. It was a trial balloon sent up by those who perceive a coalition of military and law enforcement to be a good thing."[206] Viewing federal law enforcement as part of a conspiracy against the right, the newspaper continues, "It was, therefore, a portent of the future. If the present trends are allowed to continue, that future could see the use of federal forces to combat domestic terrorism, police American cities, and even enforce restrictive gun control policies."[207] The apparent reality is that for the "New American," gun control was the biggest threat the American public faced with militarizing police, and Waco was merely a test run for what was to occur in the future.

The August 1993 issue of "Soldier of Fortune," a magazine covering conflict and international security geared towards an audience of militia and military enthusiasts, featured letters to the editor that included the sentiment that "I do not condone the actions and motives of Koresh, who is ultimately responsible for the deaths of those who followed him. At the same time, the mockery that led to these deaths seems much the responsibility of our federal law enforcement leaders who also sacrificed their followers (the agents) by tasking them to carry out an incompetent operation's orders in an effort headed for disaster from the outset."[208] Continuing further, a frequent contributor for Soldier of Fortune, James Pate, who covered the Waco siege for the magazine, stated a former ATF official told him, "there has been an institutional ethic developing within the BATF which has had the inevitable result of depriving citizens of basic

legal rights and to occasionally invite confrontation, if one spoils for a fight it will soon find him. The Waco gunfight comes as no surprise. The only surprise is that it took so long."[209] The readers and contributors of "Soldier of Fortune" again highlight Waco as a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, this time, the self-fulfilling prophecy demonstrates that the government would always fulfill a violent end, with the Branch members being the unlucky victims. Portraying federal law enforcement as both stripping away rights and liberties and victims of an inept chain of command paints these agencies as a violent outgroup that threatens the very safety and survival of gun owners.

A more visceral reaction was the September 1993 issue of Soldier of Fortune, which contained the following letter to the editor by W. Carter, residing in Miami, Florida: "Having just read Charlie Beckwith's article "What went wrong in Waco?" I'm looking for a bucket to heave in. Anybody who "cried" upon hearing about four government goons being killed and another 16 wounded needs some command guidance about who the aggressor was in that situation."[210] A profound example of how outgroup threat gets turned into legitimized violence through painting Federal Agents as the aggressor illustrates the siege and the legacy thereof as a zero-sum game where either the Branch of Federal Agents are the ultimate victors or losers. Carter continues, "As for Koresh and Co., the enemy of my enemy is my friend. If all the people who read SOF (Soldier of Fortune) and complained about the ATF had given Koresh a little help and run up the ATF casualty list, maybe the bureaucrats and politicians wouldn't sleep so soundly knowing that squads of government stormtroopers may not be able to protect them."[211] W. Carter's statement shows the conclusion of the self-fulfilling prophecy proposed by James Pate in that by constructing the ATF and FBI as a violent outgroup, individuals like Carter viewed these agencies the same way Federal Law Enforcement viewed the Branch. By creating the ATF and

FBI in this way, we see that using the same kind of worldbuilding explored in Chapter Two, the ATF and FBI became victims of a similar process of stereotyping, leading to the legitimation of violence against these organizations.

These ideas came to a head with the April 1995 issue of Soldier of Fortune ominously featuring militias as its cover story, focusing on the Michigan Militia that once held Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols as members. Emblazoned with the blurb "Modern Minutemen tell Feds: Don't Tread on Us!" The article explores the growing force of militias in the 90s. The coverage begins by telling the reader that militias are active in every state besides Hawaii and Delaware and that their presence and numbers are growing daily. While the article states that no singular issue draws an individual to a militia, an increasing number of events have convinced even those with skeptical dispensations that the country is rapidly becoming a police state bent on destroying liberty with the Second Amendment at the core. However, the Clinton administration's actions on gun control, like the Brady Bill, were a significant catalyst for why specific organizations like the Michigan Militia swelled to 12,000 members.[212]

A further rallying cry for militia members came from John Salter, who filed charges against the Federal Government regarding Ruby Ridge by lifting up the events of Waco, stating, "A government that will turn its tanks upon its people, for any reason, is a government with a taste for blood and a thirst for power and must either be smartly rebuked or blindly obeyed in deadly fear."[213] Demonstrating that Ruby Ridge and Waco had become a critical incident for anti-government radicals who saw their worst fears realized in the mountains of Idaho and ranch land just outside of Waco. A separate section of the article by James McQuaid describes the membership of these militias as "largely libertarians, populists, and republicans. They include most faiths, and many are veterans." However, in contrast, McQuaid describes the leadership as

"populist, Christian, and stridently anti-U.N."[214] McQuaid concludes that "Despite the law-abiding nonviolence of its demonstrations, the Michigan Militia is preparing to face the ruthless violence of the ATF, FBI, and their comrade organizations.[215] In McQuaid, we find the symbols of firearms, anti-government, and religion converging, illustrating how the secular, such as libertarian ideals and firearms, can become consumed by religious fervor, mainly through leadership structures like in these militias. This shows a move away from just audience movements into client movements with chains of command and relationships being formed around ideas that spread at the audience level.

The article continues to declare that the government's goal is to paint an ugly picture of militia members and impose a general brainwashing of the public and the military to prepare to disarm law-abiding citizens with force if necessary. According to the Michigan Militia, four targets appear to be the first on the list of those to be disarmed, including nationalists, drifters, patriots, and former military men. A final cutaway explains how to maintain a healthy militia, with the first rule being, "Know the laws of God and obey them. God will not bless his people with victory against the godless, one-world-order federalists if his laws are not obeyed, to begin with. Also, remember that God gives every living creature he creates the right of self-defense."[216] Though these militias pulled on cultural and political forces, religion was paramount in not only sustaining the ideals of these militias but also in justifying their use of force. This shows that these militias in the '90s served as another precursor to modern white Christian nationalism through their use of this triangulation to throw off democratic norms to achieve their goals.

These examples demonstrate how disparate sources can create an audience-level movement by supplying the necessary symbols for creating moral authority and understanding. The idea that the government threatens the average citizen is critical among all these sources.

Providing the narrative that soon, one may face an apocalyptic battle like the Branch. Chief among these symbols was the combination of religious symbols like God with firearms and ideas of self-defense that helped motivate individuals into joining groups like militias. In this way, groups like the Michigan Militia could serve either as a client-style movement or even a full-blown new religious movement for an individual radicalized by literature produced by these organizations. However, the audience level only creates symbols and affiliations with ideas. It requires the client-style movement to see actions taken on behalf of the symbolic ideas developed from the legacy of Waco. We see the disastrous results of these movements in the actions of individuals like McVeigh. Fortunately, the militia movement of the 1990s dissipated after the Oklahoma City Bombing, never becoming a full-fledged new religious or political movement. However, the concern remains that this legacy demonstrates a similar process that white Christian nationalism is taking, particularly with the legacy of the January 6th insurrection.

Conclusion: The Fire Still Burns: How the Legacy of Waco Resounds Today

The same symbols and rhetoric that emboldened individuals like McVeigh or even Koresh are still just as salient today as they were in the 90s. One of the most impactful examples is that former president Donald Trump began his 2024 campaign in none other than Waco, Texas. However, this adoption of Waco could also be found during the 2016 presidential election, with associates of Donald Trump using the Waco siege to reinforce a negative perception of Hillary Clinton. Roger Stone, an adviser to Trump's 2016 campaign, and Robert Morrow, former chairman of the Travis County, Texas Republican Party, dedicate their book *The Clinton's War on Women* as "In remembrance of the seventy-six people, members of the Branch Davidian church, who died in their home at Mount Carmel, Texas, on April 19th, 1993, following the decisions

and actions of Hillary Clinton."[217] Demonstrating the staying power of Waco as a flashpoint at what was then twenty-three years after the events.

This legacy of Waco, while implicit, was seen not only in the location but in how the Trump campaign used January 6th. During the rally, the festivities started with playing a song entitled "Justice for All," sung by a choir of individuals incarcerated for actions during the January 6th insurrection, portraying them as martyrs for the cause of liberty as they sang the national anthem, followed by Trump reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Taking the stage, Trump declared to these men, "You will be vindicated and proud," before continuing to state, "The thugs and criminals who are corrupting our justice system will be defeated, discredited, and totally disgraced."[218] These sentiments present the idea that Trump and his supporters are embattled in a crusade against a system, not unlike that explored in *The Turner Diaries* or even in the rhetoric of the Branch. While the rally made no explicit allusions to the raid that had occurred a mere 17 miles away, Trump did not shy away from using apocalyptic language during his speech, stating, "2024 is the final battle. It's going to be the big one. You put me back in the White House, their reign (referring to the Deep State or System) will be over, and America will be a free nation once again." Continuing to add, "But as far as the eye can see, the abuses of power that we're currently witnessing at all levels of government will go down as among the most shameful, corrupt, depraved chapters in all of American history."[219] This illustrates that Trump's defeat in 2020 is draped in the same imagery that the Branch used to explain the events that happened to them. It demonstrates the feeling that the government has moved from a corrupt organization to a threat to the average American.

This same sentiment was echoed by Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia in her attempts to abolish the ATF, with her expressing that her efforts are to protect

gun owners from a "tyrannical, power-hungry group of bureaucrats" just as the letters to the editor in Soldier of Fortune wanted.[220] This rationale was the same reason given for the surge in militia membership in the 90s, further showing the consecration of firearms by tying firearms to the very essence of liberty and freedom. Trump and Greene's statements show that their beliefs align with being in high tension with society and are an attempt to fundamentally challenge and reinterpret both Christian religious and American political ideals. However, most concerningly, Trump's language of a final battle demonstrates the apocalyptic nature of his beliefs, and the idea that Americans must elect him if they ever wish to be free again shows a move towards active apocalypticism in which "good patriotic" Americans must secure their future once and for all even if that means drastic violence. Thus, as white Christian nationalism continues to attempt to legitimize itself, the threefold evolution will be imperative in understanding how individuals engage with the movement. Making analysis imperative at three levels, media, close networks, and social networks, to understand how white Christian nationalism achieves agency and legitimacy at all three levels.

To conclude, understanding that white Christian nationalism is a cultural movement is imperative in understanding its threat not only to American politics but also to American religion. However, the cultural analysis only goes as far as to obfuscate how the idea works as a religious type of movement, particularly in the style of a new religious movement. Understanding the worldmaking and building of the Branch and how it influenced even more radical individuals like Terry Nichols and Timothy McVeigh gives us imperative insight into how religious ideas can permeate boundaries and move beyond the traditional institutions and ideas of religion as hypothesized through the work of Stark and Bainbridge and the theory of Lived Religion. Continuing to develop this understanding will be critical in a continuing effort to

alleviate the legitimacy and worldmaking of white Christian nationalism as it continues to mold itself closer to becoming a new form of “orthodox” religion and political belief system. The framework of white Christian nationalism as an apocalyptic movement provides it with a unifying worldview in which adherents are separate from and, by extension, under threat from broader society. Then, the apocalyptic provides white Christian nationalism with a sense of legitimacy, agency, and embattlement, particularly over the challenge of when different worldviews come into conflict and are misunderstood. Finally, the apocalyptic helps white Christian nationalism create rage and legitimize violence through symbolic understandings inside the movement. Just as these three features helped create and sustain the Branch and helped lead to violence. From this idea, the fire of white Christian nationalism has the potential to burn down the American experiment. However, by understanding the history of how this fire was lit by events like Ruby Ridge, Waco, and the Oklahoma City Bombing, perhaps we can avoid an American Apocalypse.

Endnotes

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[8] Kenneth Newport and Gribben Crawford, *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 132-133.
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[10] Note that apocalyptic is often used in place of eschatology, a discipline of theology that studies the end times or end of the world, translating literally into the study of the last things. This is done to sidestep the complex and vital work that goes into understanding these ideas from a theological perspective while also demonstrating that apocalypticism goes beyond merely the theological into a total worldview.
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[25] Perry and Whitehead, *Taking America Back for God*, 11.
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[32] Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, 192
[33] Shipps, *Mormonism: The Story of a New Religious Tradition*, 7
[34] The Great Controversy has many additions and subtractions to its title.
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[37] White, *The Great Controversy Ended*, 22.

[38] *Seventh-Day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, D.C.:Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 179.
[39] *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines* (Silver Spring, Maryland: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2006), 181.
[40] *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of Fundamental Doctrines*, 192-197.
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