

COLUMN LEFT/
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From Salem to Waco, by Way of the Nazis

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Rodney King's beating captured the nation's attention for more than a year. The extermination of more than 80 Americans during an armed attack by federal agents outside Waco is already slipping off the front pages.

But then, King is a black man whose maltreatment came to symbolize police violence against the poor. The Davidians were "a cult," and thus exempted from justice and compassion. Atty. Gen. Janet Reno and her boss have thrown in allegations of child abuse against David Koresh, the Davidians' leader. To call someone a child abuser these days is like calling someone a communist in the 1950s or a witch in the 17th Century. Normal standards of evidence or reason don't apply.

There was compelling evidence, claimed President Clinton's spokesman George Stephanopoulos, that the children were being abused, even to instruction on how to "clamp down" on cyanide pills. In fact, the FBI has conceded that there's no evidence for these chilling claims. But child abuse is a headline-grabber and conscience-absolver, as Reno knows well from her days as a prosecutor in Dade County.

Locked in a fierce reelection battle for that office in 1984, Reno seized the initiative with the highly publicized prosecution of a Latino couple running a baby-sitting service. After psychiatric manipulation straight out of Stalin's treason trials, the wife was induced to testify against her husband, alleging ritual abuse of her and her children. Reno had great personal involvement in this process, even holding the wife's hand during her depositions.

Reno had less success in another "satanic abuse" case that she launched in 1989 against a 14-year Dutch boy, whom she managed to hold in the Dade Juvenile Detention Center, often in solitary, for 20 months before a jury found him innocent.

After that trial, a child psychiatrist named Stephen Ceci who testified for the boy said of Reno, that "given the concern over child-abuse issues, she (Reno) may be trumpeted as a kind of hero, a woman who will go the extra mile to make sure our children are safe."

Outside Waco, Reno again went that extra mile, rejecting mediation offered by prominent religious groups. Instead, for six hours the FBI pumped CS2 into a compound containing children too small to wear the gas masks allegedly stockpiled by the Davidians. It now seems likely that the

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M-60 tank knocked over kerosene for the compound's lamps (which the Feds knew about) and almost everyone burned alive.

This appalling event took place on April 19, 1943, the 50th anniversary of the Nazi assault on the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw. The Nazis too regarded "cults" as ripe candidates for persecution. On July 20, 1937, the SS Reichsfuehrer Reinhard Heydrich ordered the banning and persecution of small religious sects, including the Seventh-day Adventists.

Today, in the United States, similar intolerance is being sedulously fanned, not only by such bodies as the Cult Awareness Network, but by powerful publications such as Time magazine, which illustrated its 1990 cover story attack on the Church of Scientology with a graphic of an octopus, the identical graphic used by the Nazis in their persecution of the sects.

The role in Waco of the Cult Awareness Network, whose members are respectfully cited in the press as "experts," may well have been crucial. The network's president, Patricia Ryan, was quoted by the Houston Post on April 9 as saying that the FBI should use any means necessary to arrest Koresh, including lethal force. Soon after the initial Feb. 28 federal raid, another "deprogrammer" named Rick Ross, long associated with the network, said on television that he had "consulted" with the ATF before the raid. The network's former executive director, Priscilla Coates, raised allegations of child abuse.

The Cult Awareness Network has a long record of persecution of members of what it deems to be cults. It promoted the infamous and illegal raid on the Island Pond commune in Vermont in 1984. Some of its members either face kidnaping charges or have already been convicted in other cases.

Outside Waco, the counsels of such experts assisted in what should be regarded as the Bay of Pigs of the Clinton Administration, an event that will forever mark his term. And as a final horrible irony in this saga of Nazi-like affront to religious tolerance, the deprogrammers are demanding that they be allowed to exercise their dark arts on the burned Davidian survivors so that they testify correctly and desist from maintaining—as they have—that no mass suicide was under way. The FBI says "this is worth considering," but the decision is up to the U.S. attorney.

Onward to Salem: gas, fire and brainwashing, courtesy of the Justice Department.

Alexander Cockburn writes for the Nation and other publications.