

Cult leader seen 294 days before raid

Attorney says Howell not recluse feds claim

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In the days after the abortive raid at Mount Carmel, federal officials, defending their decision not to arrest cult leader Vernon Howell away from his followers, said he had not left the compound "for months."

However, an attorney for a cult member who fled the burning structure April 19 said Tuesday that Howell ate pizza, drank beer and studied the Bible with men he knew to be undercover agents at their house across from the compound as recently as two weeks before the raid.

"For some six weeks, those undercover agents had been across the street there, eating pizza with them, drinking beer with them and studying the Bible with them, and they knew full well that they were law enforcement," said attorney Gary Richardson.

"So why did they go in like they did? The only way to answer that, if you believe what my client and the others who have come out are saying, is that the feds never intended to let them come out peacefully, at least not David Koresh and some of his closest followers.

"That is the only explanation that makes any sense. The end justifies the means. Too often that is the federal government's logic. They could have bagged him anywhere. He was at the agent's house within the last two weeks before they went in."

Four Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents and perhaps as many as six cult members were killed during the violent gunfight that erupted Feb. 28 when federal agents tried to arrest Howell, also known as David Koresh, for firearms violations.

Then after 51 days of negotiations, the compound burned to the ground April 19. Howell and 86 followers, including at least 17 children, are presumed to have died in the fire.

Not left 'for months'

Dan Hartnett, ATF associate director, said four days after the failed raid that agency "intelligence" led authorities to believe that Howell had not left the compound "for months" before the raid.

However, the *Tribune-Herald* confirmed the next day that Howell was at a local auto repair garage six days before the raid, at a West Waco restaurant three weeks before the raid and at a Waco business about a month before.

Others since have said Howell was far from the recluse that federal officials had tried to portray.

Richardson, a U.S. attorney in Oklahoma from 1981 to 1984, successfully defended former McLennan County District Attorney Vic Feazell on federal bribery and racketeering charges in 1987 and won a \$58 million libel verdict for Feazell from the A.H. Belo Corp. two years ago.

He is representing cult member David Thibodeau, who survived the deadly fire with eight others.

Howell's 'Mighty Men'

Thibodeau has not been charged, although court records indicate ATF officials think he was one of Howell's "Mighty Men," so called for a group of warriors who fought for King David in the Bible.

Richardson called the entire operation — from the botched raid to the 51-day standoff that ended in tragedy — "one big screw-up."

"It is like the old saying, 'If it starts bad, it will most likely end bad.' I think that's what we've got here, and it's a classic example of it," he said.

Government officials are now engaged in a massive cover-up, Richardson said, which includes the decision to hire a former ATF employee as head of an independent arson investigation team.

"I don't think the whole truth will ever come out. I think if you sit and talk to David and listen to what he says, it is obvious he has no ax to grind. He is not belligerent. He just sits and tells what happened, and it is not what is being reported by federal authorities."

Thibodeau has declined to talk publicly about the final hours before the fire, when FBI members were punching holes in the compound and filling it with tear gas.

Richardson said his client saw no cult members setting fires, as the FBI has said, but he saw several lamps knocked over during the tank assaults that could have started the fires.

ABOUT THE NAME

Although other media are calling the leader of the Branch Davidians David Koresh, the *Tribune-Herald* calls him Vernon Howell because that name is more familiar to local readers. Howell legally changed his name in 1990 to David Koresh for publicity and business purposes.



Howell

He declined to say where Howell was when the fires started, but Thibodeau has said that he thinks the apocalyptic cult leader is dead.

Possible exit

Had authorities given Howell just two or three days longer to finish his manuscript unveiling the mysteries of the Seven Seals in the Old Testament Book of Revelation, Thibodeau thinks Howell would have led his people out of the compound, despite similar unkept promises, he said.

FBI officials have said they were convinced Howell was never going to lead a peaceful exodus from his fortress.

However, FBI tactics perhaps led to the prolonged standoff and tragic end, Richardson said.

"For example, on one occasion they had what they considered to be an agreement to seriously consider coming out on a given day," Richardson said.

"But before the people inside were even allowed to give their response, the feds came in with their tanks and ran over the kids' toys and some of the vehicles, as David has said, just to antagonize them. It made them feel that the feds were not acting in good faith."

Richardson said he would be surprised if any of the cult members charged so far go to trial.

"I can't imagine the government pushing this thing and inviting the defense lawyers to do all the discovery that they would be entitled to do," he said.

"If David and the others who were on the inside have any significant degree of accuracy in what they are saying, I don't think the government would want that information to come out."