

What could have stopped tragedy?

Throughout the whole mess near Waco, the thought kept surfacing — was all that dying really necessary?

Not to belittle the sacrifice of federal agents who charged into battle and paid with their lives, but the entire operation had a very bureaucratic slant to it.

The federal assault on the Mount Carmel compound, it can be said now with the usual hindsight, was doomed from the start. If indeed the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had practiced the mission for months, agents should have known that the facility they were raiding had an excellent location for observation. A caravan of vehicles full of people wearing camouflage, especially on a quiet Sunday morning, cannot go undetected.

Perhaps the assault force was filled with what can best be called the cop mentality. Some of this attitude is understandable. There is increased safety in numbers. Law enforcement officers find themselves the target of violence in many of their everyday situations.

But that mindset can produce overreaction. Drug raids that, quite frankly, are routine arrests can be turned into circuses by grandstanding officers. Maybe they watch too many of those television shows that feature actual film footage of officers in action.

That's not to say, of course, that some drug raids don't pose grave danger to officers' lives. It's just that if enough homework is done, most reasonable officers can tell when a simple knock on the door is better than knocking down the door.

The same principle applies to the Waco raid. Sure, the Branch Davidians were armed to the teeth. That's one good reason to seek alternatives to brute force.

Unfortunately, the ATF brass chose to put on a show of governmental might. And, it should be pointed out, no one objected to the media being there to chronicle what the feds assumed would be a triumph of good over evil.

This might be where the bureaucratic outlook didn't serve the mission well. In times of budget cutting, most federal agencies are in a rush to justify not only their existence but their need for more funding. By bringing an entire gun-hoarding religious cult to justice, the ATF could have looked very good in the eyes of lawmakers who are going to be forced into cutting some federal corners.

But in the aftermath of the initial confrontation, information surfaced that showed the ATF could have done a bit more to understand what it faced at the cult headquarters.

Very likely the weapons that were used to kill and wound ATF agents had once been confiscated by authorities when David Koresh and seven followers were unsuccessfully prosecuted on murder charges in 1988. Following disposition of the case, a court ordered the stockpile of guns and ammunition returned to them. ATF agents could easily have found out what manner of weaponry likely awaited them by checking those court documents.

Even more tragic is the fact that the federal agents might have been able to gain valuable insight by contacting the man who was in charge of the prosecution.

Vic Feazell, former McLennan County district attorney, explained how authorities went about arresting Koresh and his followers. Bear in mind that the charges of murder were far more serious than the alleged offenses that prompted the ATF raid.

In that instance, Feazell said, McLennan County lawmen called Koresh, then known as Vernon Howell, and told him there were pending charges, that they would have to turn themselves in and surrender their weapons. Deputies went to the compound and the Davidians complied with orders. "We treated them like human beings, rather than storm-trooping the place," he said.

There's no way of knowing whether a peaceful solution could have been worked out, but a lot of people can't help but wonder.