

tive Jim Bacchus in the back, himself a great advocate of education. And I'd like to remind all of you that the ultimate purpose of the National Teacher of the Year Award is to find a way for the rest of us to express our appreciation to people all across this country who give their lives to our children, all of the teachers of this country who get up every day and do

their best to try to advance the cause of learning for all the children of America. They are, in so many ways, our most important public servants.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:25 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

The President's News Conference April 20, 1993

Tragedy in Waco

The President. On February the 28th, four Federal agents were killed in the line of duty trying to enforce the law against the Branch Davidian compound, which had illegally stockpiled weaponry and ammunition and placed innocent children at risk. Because the BATF operation had failed to meet its objective, a 51-day standoff ensued.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation then made every reasonable effort to bring this perilous situation to an end without bloodshed and further loss of life. The Bureau's efforts were ultimately unavailing because the individual with whom they were dealing, David Koresh, was dangerous, irrational, and probably insane. He engaged in numerous activities which violated both Federal law and common standards of decency. He was, moreover, responsible for the deaths and injuries which occurred during the action against the compound in February. Given his inclination towards violence and in an effort to protect his young hostages, no provocative actions were taken for more than 7 weeks by Federal agents against the compound.

This weekend I was briefed by Attorney General Reno on an operation prepared by the FBI, designed to increase pressure on Koresh and persuade those in the compound to surrender peacefully. The plan included a decision to withhold the use of ammunition, even in the face of fire, and instead to use tear gas that would not cause permanent harm to health but would, it was hoped, force the people in the compound to come outside and to surrender.

I was informed of the plan to end the siege. I discussed it with Attorney General Reno. I asked the questions I thought it was appropriate

for me to ask. I then told her to do what she thought was right, and I take full responsibility for the implementation of the decision.

Yesterday's action ended in a horrible human tragedy. Mr. Koresh's response to the demands for his surrender by Federal agents was to destroy himself and murder the children who were his captives, as well as all the other people who were there who did not survive. He killed those he controlled, and he bears ultimate responsibility for the carnage that ensued.

Now we must review the past with an eye toward the future. I have directed the United States Departments of Justice and Treasury to undertake a vigorous and thorough investigation to uncover what happened and why and whether anything could have been done differently. I have told the Departments to involve independent professional law enforcement officials in the investigation. I expect to receive analysis and answers in whatever time is required to complete the review. Finally, I have directed the Departments to cooperate fully with all congressional inquiries so that we can continue to be fully accountable to the American people.

I want to express my appreciation to the Attorney General, to the Justice Department, and to the Federal agents on the frontlines who did the best job they could under deeply difficult circumstances.

Again I want to say, as I did yesterday, I am very sorry for the loss of life which occurred at the beginning and at the end of this tragedy in Waco. I hope very much that others who will be tempted to join cults and to become involved with people like David Koresh will be deterred by the horrible scenes they have seen over the last 7 weeks. And I hope very much

that the difficult situations which Federal agents confronted there and which they will be doubtless required to confront in other contexts in the future will be somewhat better handled and better understood because of what has been learned now.

Q. Mr. President, can you, first of all, tell us why after 51 days you decided—

Q. Mr. President, can you describe for us what it is that Janet Reno outlined to you in your 15-minute phone conversation with—

The President. I can't hear you both. If one will go first and then the other.

Q. Sorry. Can you describe what Janet Reno—

Q. Mr. President—

The President. I'll answer both your questions, but I can't do it at once.

Q. Can you describe what she told you on Sunday about the nature of the operation and how much detail you knew about it?

The President. Yes. I was told by the Attorney General that the FBI strongly felt that the time had come to take another step in trying to dislodge the people in the compound. And she described generally what the operation would be, that they wanted to go in and use tear gas which had been tested not to cause permanent damage to adults or to children but which would make it very difficult for people to stay inside the building. And it was hoped that the tear gas would permit them to come outside.

I was further told that under no circumstances would our people fire any shots at them, even if fired upon. They were going to shoot the tear gas from armored vehicles which would protect them, and there would be no exchange of fire. In fact, as you know, an awful lot of shots were fired by the cult members at the Federal officials. There were no shots coming back from the Government side.

I asked a number of questions. The first question I asked is, why now? We have waited 7 weeks; why now? The reasons I was given were the following:

Number one, that there was a limit to how long the Federal authorities could maintain with their limited resources the quality and intensity of coverage by experts there. They might be needed in other parts of the country.

Number two, that the people who had reviewed this had never seen a case quite like this one before, and they were convinced that no progress had been made recently and no

progress was going to be made through the normal means of getting Koresh and the other cult members to come out.

Number three, that the danger of their doing something to themselves or to others was likely to increase, not decrease, with the passage of time.

And number four, that they had reason to believe that the children who were still inside the compound were being abused significantly, as well as being forced to live in unsanitary and unsafe conditions.

So for those reasons, they wanted to move at that time.

The second question I asked the Attorney General is whether they had given consideration to all of the things that could go wrong and evaluated them against what might happen that was good. She said that the FBI personnel on the scene and those working with them were convinced that the chances of bad things happening would only increase with the passage of time.

The third question I asked was, has the military been consulted? As soon as the initial tragedy came to light in Waco, that's the first thing I asked to be done, because it was obvious that this was not a typical law enforcement situation. Military people were then brought in, helped to analyze the situation and some of the problems that were presented by it. And so I asked if the military had been consulted. The Attorney General said that they had and that they were in basic agreement, that there was only one minor tactical difference of opinion between the FBI and the military, something that both sides thought was not of overwhelming significance.

Having asked those questions and gotten those answers, I said that if she thought it was the right thing to do, that she should proceed and that I would support it. And I stand by that today.

Q. Mr. President—

The President. Wait.

Go ahead.

Q. Can you address the widespread perception, reported widely—television, radio, and newspapers—that you were trying somehow to distance yourself from this disaster?

The President. No, I'm bewildered by it. The only reason I made no public statement yesterday, let me say, the only reason I made no public statement yesterday is that I had nothing to add to what was being said, and I literally

did not know until rather late in the day whether anybody was still alive other than those who had been actually seen and taken to the hospital or taken into custody. It was purely and simply a question of waiting for events to unfold.

I can't account for why people speculated one way or the other, but I talked to the Attorney General on the day before the action took place. I talked to her yesterday. I called her again late last night after she appeared on the Larry King show, and I talked to her again this morning. It is not possible for a President to distance himself from things that happen when the Federal Government is in control.

I will say this, however. I was, frankly, "surprised" would be a mild word, to say that anyone that would suggest that the Attorney General should resign because some religious fanatics murdered themselves.

I regret what happened, but it is not possible in this life to control the behavior of others in every circumstance. These people killed four Federal officials in the line of duty. They were heavily armed. They fired on Federal officials yesterday repeatedly, and they were never fired back on. We did everything we could to avoid the loss of life. They made the decision to immolate themselves. And I regret it terribly, and I feel awful about the children.

But in the end, the last comment I had from Janet Reno is when—and I talked to her on Sunday—I said, "Now, I want you to tell me once more why you believe, not why they believe, why you believe we should move now rather than wait some more." And she said, "It's because of the children. They have evidence that those children are still being abused and that they're in increasingly unsafe conditions, and that they don't think it will get any easier with the passage of time. I have to take their word for that. So that is where I think things stand."

Q. Can we assume then that you don't think this was mishandled in view of the outcome, that you didn't run out of patience? And if you had it to do over again, would you really decide that way?

The President. No—well, I think what you can assume is just exactly what I announced today. The FBI has done a lot of things right for this country over a long period of time. This is the same FBI that found the people that bombed the World Trade Center in lickety-split, record time. We want an inquiry to analyze

the steps along the way. Is there something else we should have known? Is there some other question they should have asked? Is there some other question I should have asked? Can I say for sure that we could have done nothing else to make the outcome different? I don't know that. That's why I want the inquiry and that's why I would like to make sure that we have some independent law enforcement people, not political people but totally nonpolitical, outside experts who can bring to bear the best evidence we have.

There is, unfortunately, a rise in this sort of fanaticism all across the world. And we may have to confront it again. And I want to know whether there is anything we can do, particularly when there are children involved. But I do think it is important to recognize that the wrongdoers in this case were the people who killed others and then killed themselves.

Q. Mr. President, were there any other options presented to you for resolving this situation at any point from February 28th until yesterday?

The President. Well, yes, I got regular reports all along the way. There were lots of other options pursued. If you go back—you all covered it very well. You did a very good job of it. I mean, the FBI and the other authorities there pursued any number of other options all along the way, and a lot of them early on seemed to be working. Some of the children got out. Some of the other people left. At one point, there seemed to be some lines of communication opening up between Koresh and the authorities. And then he would say things and not do them, and things just began to spin downward.

In terms of what happened yesterday, the conversation I had with the Attorney General did not involve other options except whether we should take more time with the present strategy we were pursuing because they said they wanted to do this, because they thought this was the best way to get people out of the compound quickly before they could kill themselves. That's what they thought.

Q. Did the government know that the children did not have gas masks?

Q. [Inaudible]—congressional hearings once the situation—are you in agreement with that?

The President. That's up to the Congress. They can do whatever they want. But I think it's very important that the Treasury and Justice Departments launch this investigation and bring

in some outside experts. And as I said in my statement, if any congressional committees want to look into it, we will fully cooperate. There is nothing to hide here. This was probably the most well-covered operation of its kind in the history of the country.

Go ahead, Sarah [Sarah McClendon, McClendon News Service].

Q. There are two questions I want to ask you. The first is, I think that they knew very well that the children did not have gas masks while the adults did, so the children had no chance because this gas was very—she said it was not lethal, but it was very dangerous to the children, and they could not have survived without gas masks. And on February 28th—let's go back—didn't those people have a right to practice their religion?

The President. They were not just practicing their religion. The Treasury Department believed that they had violated Federal laws, any number of them.

Q. What Federal laws?

The President. Let me go back and answer that. I can't answer the question about the gas masks, except to tell you that the whole purpose of using the tear gas was that it had been tested; they were convinced that it wouldn't kill either a child or an adult, but it would force anybody that breathed it to run outside. And one of the things that I've heard—I don't want to get into the details of this because I don't know—but one of the things that they were speculating about today was that the wind was blowing so fast that the windows might have been opened and some of the gas might have escaped, and that may be why it didn't have the desired effect.

They also knew, Sarah, that there was an underground compound, a bus buried underground, where the children could be sent. I think they were hoping very much that if the children were not released immediately outside, that the humane thing would be done and that the children would be sent someplace where they could be protected.

In terms of the gas masks themselves, I learned yesterday—I did not ask this fact question before—that the gas was supposed to stay active in the compound longer than the gas masks themselves were to work. So that it was thought that even if they all had gas masks, that eventually the gas would force them out in a nonviolent, nonshooting circumstance.

Press Secretary Myers. Last question.

Q. Mr. President, why are you still saying that—

Q. Could you tell us whether or not you ever asked Janet Reno about the possibility of a mass suicide? And when you learned about the actual fire and explosion what went through your mind during those horrendous moments?

The President. What I asked Janet Reno is if they had considered all the worst things that could happen. And of course, the whole issue of suicide had been raised in the public—he had—that had been debated anyway. And she said that the people who were most knowledgeable about these kinds of issues concluded that there was no greater risk of that now than there would be tomorrow or the next day or the day after that or at anytime in the future. That was the judgment they made. Whether they were right or wrong, of course, we will never know.

What happened when I saw the fire, when I saw the building burning? I was sick. I felt terrible. And my immediate concern was whether the children had gotten out and whether they were escaping or whether they were inside trying to burn themselves up. That's the first thing I wanted to know.

Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, why are you still saying it was a Janet Reno decision? Isn't it, in the end, your decision?

The President. Well, what I'm saying is that I didn't have a 4- or 5-hour detailed briefing from the FBI. I didn't go over every strategic part of it. It is a decision for which I take responsibility. I'm the President of the United States, and I signed off on the general decision and giving her the authority to make the last call. When I talked to her on Sunday, some time had elapsed. She might have made a decision to change her mind. I said, "If you decide to go forward with this tomorrow, I will support you." And I do support her.

She is not ultimately responsible to the American people; I am. But I think she has conducted her duties in an appropriate fashion, and she has dealt with this situation, I think, as well as she could have.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President's 12th news conference began at 1:36 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.