

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE YOU WERE BORN
IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

JKF, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Gerald Ford Did What?

At Buchanan's praise of the America First Committee (AFC) of 1940-41, whose 800,000 members made it the largest antiwar organization in American history, has won him the sort of press usually reserved for the grislier serial killers. The AFC's platform stated that while "The United States must build an impregnable defense for America... American democracy can be preserved only by keeping out of the European war." But just who were these America Firsters who names today are filthier than mud?

- Harvard student John F. Kennedy mailed the AFC \$100 with a note that read, "what you are all doing is vital." His big brother Joe organized the Harvard Committee Against Military Intervention. Future Kennedy brother-in-law Sargent Shriver, who became director of the Peace Corps and George McGovern's running mate, was active in the AFC-allied youth group College Men for Defense First, as was actor José Ferrer.

- Another President, Gerald R. Ford, was among the earliest organizers of America First, but he resigned because he feared that his political activities might cost him his position as assistant football coach at Yale.

- Novelist Sinclair Lewis was a card-carrying America Firster and one of many literary men (William Saroyan, John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, Robinson Jeffers) opposed to the war. Poet e.e. cummings, who despised Roosevelt (as did most American poets of the 1930s), dubbing him "Herr Roosevelt, Lord of the New Dealings," was so ardent an America Firster that he overcame his detestation of radio to visit a neighbor's house to listen to Charles Lindbergh on the noisebox.

- Student Gore Vidal led the America First Committee at Phillips Exeter Academy.

- Teddy Roosevelt's wickedly witty daughter Alice Roosevelt Longworth ("If you haven't got anything good to say about anyone, come and sit by me.") was on the national AFC board, from which she dispensed acid wisecracks about her cousin the President. ("When I think of Franklin and Eleanor in the White House, I could grind my teeth to powder and blow them out my nose.")

MIDWESTERN BUSINESSMEN WERE THE BACKBONE OF THE AMERICA FIRST COMMITTEE.

- Actress Lillian Gish was a member of the AFC national committee. As a result she found it impossible to find work in pro-war Hollywood, though none dared call it blacklisting. Her agent finally secured a \$65,000 role for her, on the condition that she resign from the AFC. She did.

- Architect Frank Lloyd Wright donated money to the AFC but was kept off the national board because "he has quite a reputation for immorality," as one staffer wrote primly.

- Midwestern businessmen were the backbone of the America First Committee. They included Jay C. Hormel (Hormel Meat Packing Co.), Sterling Morton (Morton Salt), R. Douglas Stuart (Quaker Oats), General Robert E. Wood (chairman of the board of Sears Roebuck), William H. Regnery (Western Shade Cloth Co.), and Edward L. Ryerson Jr. (Inland Steel Corp.). Henry Ford

was a board member for two months, until the complaints of Jewish AFC members caused the board to drop Ford, who in the 1920s had published the notorious anti-Semitic hoax the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. According to Wayne S. Cole, the leading historian of the AFC, the group assiduously excluded pro-fascists and anti-Semites, including the followers of the popular radio priest Father Charles Coughlin. ("We don't want you people," General Wood told the Coughlinites point-blank.)

- Advertising man Chester Bowles, later a key Kennedy foreign-policy advisor, was an AFC national committeeman, a fact he somehow forgot to mention in his autobiography and in his various Senate confirmation hearings.

- Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi's wife Marie was an America Firster (Vince, naturally, was an interventionist).

- The America First movement spanned both Right and Left. Leftists and old liberals who joined the AFC or spoke under its auspices included *Nation* editor Oswald Garrison Villard, historian Charles Beard, Norman Thomas, Montana Senator Burton K. Wheeler, and various members of the royal family of Progressivism, the LaFollettes of Wisconsin.

- America Firsters predicted that the domestic consequences of the war would prove disastrous for their America. But even the most pessimistic never dreamed that at century's end, a politician who defended the AFC would be called a nut, a crackpot, and a Hitler-lover by journalists who might be advised to tear themselves away from the TV set for a few minutes each night so that they can read about people and movements before they slander them.

—Bill Kauffman

The Untold Waco Story

Michael McNulty proves you don't have to live in Beverly Hills to be nominated for an Academy Award.

From Fort Collins, Colorado (pop. 12,500), McNulty has captured entertainment accolades, set the agenda for major news organizations, and stirred up the political class back in Washington.

At a packed November screening, McNulty, 53, unveiled only the second film he has ever made, *Waco: A New Revelation*, a two-hour documentary about the horrible events of April 19, 1993, when FBI agents led a fatal assault against the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. (www.waco-anewrevelation.com)

The film, which will premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, is presented in a traditional documentary format but is nevertheless extraordinary in the haunting way it chronicles the events leading up to the fiery deaths of 76 Branch Davidian church members, many of whom were children.

In some ways, this is a sequel to McNulty's 1997 film, *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, which told the history of the Branch Davidians and the story of the siege. In addition to being nominated for an Oscar, the first picture won the International Documentary Association Film of the Year Award and rave reviews from critics, including a "two thumbs up" from Siskel and Ebert. McNulty, a former Navy man in Vietnam who until these films had made his living as an insurance salesman, saw this response as confirmation he had found his calling. "I figured it might be a good time to consider this as a full-time career," he told *TAE*.

So what caused this past-middle-age family man to drop everything for a new vocation? Partly it was forced on him: The insurance company he represented left

California, where he then lived, because the business climate had become so highly regulated and litigious. With time on his hands "I began investigating Waco."

McNulty, though, doesn't brook anti-government extremists. He is the one whose close scrutiny of footage obtained from CBS News destroyed the theory that the tank charging the Davidian building had a flame-thrower on its chassis: McNulty determined reflected sunlight caused what appeared to be flames.

He still remembers being at home the morning of the fatal conflagration, watching CNN while getting ready for work. "It drug on until noon, and all of a sudden fire broke out. No one had come out. There were still people inside. It was very troubling."

It meant more to McNulty in part because he knows the history of his Mormon faith. In 1837, Missouri issued an "extermination order" against Mormons which said any who remained in the state would be executed on sight. "In a little village called Hauns Mill in the northern part of the state, the militia rode in, herded Mormons into the grist mill, closed the doors, put the muzzles of their muskets between the logs, and fired inside until everyone was wounded or dead. I think there were 25 who were shot to death," he says. "Branch Davidians weren't Mormons, but they were a contending group of American religionists."

Even before his first documentary was released, McNulty knew there was more to the story than had been reported. Last year, he wrote to Attorney General Janet Reno with documentation about a pyrotechnic gas canister found in the ashes, asking about its origin. She refused to answer, maintaining her six-year denial that such munitions were ever used.



Video image from *Waco: A New Revelation*.

Last August, as McNulty was sitting at the editing machine to put together *Waco: A New Revelation*, word got out about his findings, and the issue of Waco erupted again. The FBI finally confessed to firing incendiary cartridges at the Davidians, an admission that caused an embarrassed Reno to appoint former Senator John Danforth as special counsel to investigate the matter. Evidence that at least one FBI agent fired shots at the Davidians also surfaced this fall, a scenario again at odds with the Justice Department's story. Revelations in the new film include the identities of shooters and the existence of more pyrotechnic projectiles and flash-bang devices.

McNulty's success with the Waco films is as much an indictment of the major media as of the Clinton administration. Why weren't the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and Dan Rather chasing Pulitzers in the charred remains of Mount Carmel?

One telling moment came just a few months ago. McNulty was appearing on "ABC News Nightline," when Ted Koppel and Co. insinuated he was another Waco conspiracy theorist. Peeved, McNulty told Koppel he preferred to be identified as an investigative journalist and that he was in head-to-head competition with "Nightline" for an Emmy in Best Investigative Journalism.

For whatever reason, ABC never aired the taped "Nightline" with McNulty. But one week later, Michael McNulty was clearing off space on his mantle for his new Emmy statue.

—John Meroney

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