



# Waco: The Documentary

See for yourself why Americans distrust the Feds.

Confronted with the unresisting imbecility of summer “blockbuster” fare, film critics ought to take the opportunity to turn their attention to other, more serious matters—such as, for instance, constitutional philosophy. As it happens, a powerful documentary worthy the accolade of Movie of the Month raises, though incidentally, just such questions. *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* is directed by William Gazecki and features the journalistic labors of Dan Gifford, formerly of CNN and the “MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour,” his wife Amy, who was a producer of “A Current Affair,” and the free-lancer Mike McNulty. Their purpose is simply to get to the bottom of what happened at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, between February 28 and April 19, 1993, but insofar as they are successful, they trouble us to think about what it means to live under a government that no one appears to expect to be held accountable for anything—except, possibly, an economic downturn.

In establishing a presidential, rather than a parliamentary system of government 200 years ago, our Founding Fathers were proclaiming a legalistic, as opposed to an honorable, system of public behavior. They thought to put a check on the power of “honorable” parliamentarians to do ill by writing into law the rules by which their power should be circumscribed. Ideas of honor inherited from Europe naturally lingered on, especially

in the South, but the decision so to structure the government as to make impeachment the only means of getting rid of a president, or the administration which served at the pleasure of the president, between elections whose dates follow a fixed and determined schedule has led to problems that are emerging during the presidency of Bill Clinton even more clearly than they did during that of Richard Nixon.

In Nixon’s case, impeachment worked, since it was the threat of it that drove him from office. But would it have done so if the American people had not provided, as they have for twenty-nine of the last forty-three years, for a president and Congress of different parties? Moreover, what if Nixon had not done the country the favor, before stepping down, of purging his administration of other wrongdoers? What if, say, John Mitchell had refused to resign? Nixon was, as has often been remarked, an old-fashioned kind of guy—one who, as Stewart Alsop used to say, was the natural winner of the antimacassar vote and not much else. He had a highly developed sense of shame, which is the other side of honor’s coin, and so did not force the Congress and the courts to dynamite the bad guys (including himself) out of their bunkers one by one.

Today we are not so lucky. Shamelessness is the hallmark of the Clinton administration, and its consequences are becoming every day more apparent. To be sure, the media bears its share of the responsibility for not enforcing shame upon the hickocracy, but in the post-O.J. celebrity culture of the late nineties, they might not

be able to do so even if they wanted to. Barring the discovery of a criminal trail so well-marked as to put the chief executive himself in the calaboose, no failure, no dishonesty, no peculation seems to have the power to induce a resignation. As a result, a more general tendency for people to grow more cynical and mistrustful of their government has been exacerbated. Since 1984, for example, polls show that the number of Americans who hold highly or moderately favorable opinions of the FBI has declined by nearly 20 percent and much of the difference must be owing to the seeming impossibility of pinning any blame on anyone for such debacles as Ruby Ridge and Waco.

Gazecki’s film can only help to further this process of alienation of ordinary Americans from their national police forces. It makes a strong case for the proposition that the behavior of the ATF, the FBI, and the Justice Department at Waco was either colossally incompetent to the point of criminal negligence, or that it amounted to an actual criminal conspiracy. There can scarcely be any third possibility. According to the film, the raid by agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms on February 28, 1993, which started the stand-off with the Branch Davidians, was undertaken as a publicity stunt and the Davidians were legally and morally justified in resisting it as they did. The film shows ATF Agent Sharon Wheeler arranging with local media for publicizing of what she obviously thought would be a triumphant ATF bust of arms “stockpilers.”

It is a typically vague formulation, called attention to by one witness at the congressional inquiry (held under Democratic auspices) who points out that a “stockpile” is what arms dealers like the Davidians (and many other Texans) call

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an inventory. More seriously, the film goes on to contend with some plausibility that the FBI not only started the fire that consumed the compound with sickening rapidity on April 19, 1993, but killed those inside who might otherwise have survived. At the least, the bureau was culpably irresponsible for pumping the building full of highly inflammable CS gas and then punching ventilation holes in it for the fire. Moreover, even apart from the implausibility of its hypothesis of a Jim Jones-style suicide, the Justice Department's obstruction of independent investigations into the truth must cast serious doubt on its claim that the FBI never fired a shot at Waco.

**W**ell, let us not be hysterical. The evidence presented by the film—evidence that our federal police forces are no better than those of the old South Africa, who used to announce with some regularity that suspects opposed to Apartheid had committed suicide in custody—makes a powerful case for conspiracy, but one whose believability depends (like that of so many such cases) upon impossibly complicated technical data being fought over by experts. In this case, the data come from a surveillance tape made by the FBI from an airplane equipped with FLIR (Forward Looking InfraRed) technology during the final, horrible hours of April 19. The camera produces a heat-imprinted tape, instead of the light imprint of normal photography, and it seems to show flashes coming from the direction of the government forces that could be incendiary devices and automatic weapons fire.

Independent experts engaged by the *Washington Post* to examine the claims of the film's experts were divided on the question of whether the flashes on the tape had to be, as they appeared to be, offensive fire. Surely no one would want to think that the FBI not only started the fire that consumed the compound but machine-gunned possible survivors among the women and children inside. But it is hard to find the experts' tentative doubts very reassuring. They are based on the possibility that what look like the tell-tale muzzle flashes of automatic weapons fire on the tape might be "reflec-

tions" of the hot Texas sun from bits of broken glass and metal. This seems to my untutored eye a most implausible explanation and inconsistent with the regularity of the flashes on the tape, but who am I to argue with the technical experts?

My instinct is, as I suppose most people's is, to believe those responsible law enforcement officials who say that the government side never fired a shot. As one FBI agent says toward the end of the film: "You have to trust the people in charge at the time"—a reasonable enough requirement of all citizens who have a right to expect honorable government officials. But Gazecki has anticipated this reaction, and cut us off from it by showing FBI agents and other government officials throughout the film pretty obviously lying through their teeth, both in sworn testimony before Congress and in their remarks to the news media—which may help to explain why the usually reliably pro-Clinton media are giving *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* a surprisingly respectful hearing.

In what is perhaps the most memorable instance of FBI mendacity, we hear the tape of an FBI agent on the telephone with David Koresh discussing the clash between the Davidians and the ATF agents on February 28 that left six of the former and four of the latter dead. First the agent insists that the compound was not fired on from a helicopter that was overhead at the time because the helicopter was not even armed. When Koresh repeatedly calls him a "damned liar" (the film sets out the evidence for this very clearly) the agent retreats to his fallback position that what he meant was that there were no "mounted" weapons on the helicopter, but that some of those on board "may" have been armed, finally confessing, when pressed, that these suppositious weapons had been used to shoot at people inside the compound.

Where have we heard this kind of slick, lawyerly evasion before? If the evidence that the film presents of criminal behavior by the ATF and the FBI and the Justice Department is less than wholly conclusive (and it is at the least persuasive), what it does present with absolute certainty is the definitive answer to all those who have said that Bill Clin-

ton's behavior in the matter of Gennifer Flowers or of Paula Jones or of the White-water land deal is irrelevant to his conduct of the office of president. On the contrary, the fact that our political culture suffers a man who has been caught in so many lies to go unpunished by the electorate or the Congress or the media is what is responsible for the fact that those responsible for the deaths of the Branch Davidians remain unpunished and that, as a result, more and more people, not even counting those in militias, hate and fear their own government.

**O**kay, the case for clapping Janet Reno—and at least some of her underlings—in jail is not pellucid. But at the very least (and this cannot be stressed enough), she who with ghoulishly comic inconsequence took "responsibility" for the sickening horror of the slaughter at Waco should have resigned in disgrace and been shunned by friends and family and every honorable citizen for the rest of her life or until she had done at least twenty years penitence in sackcloth and ashes, whichever came first. The fact that she has not and presumably will not, but instead continues to grin and flier in the public eye and attend receptions and give commencement addresses and appoint judges, is a stain on our national character that can never be quite washed away.

At one point in the film, Prof. Allen Stone of Harvard, who conducted a government-sponsored investigation into the siege, remarks: "When I started looking into this, I thought that the problem would be fathoming the psychology of the people inside the compound, but the psychology of the people outside the compound was more important to an understanding of what happened." In this sense, we are all outside the compound. And if we cannot learn to be ashamed as Americans of what was done to those inside it, we shall have to learn the hard way to be ashamed of being Americans. ❧

James Bowman welcomes comments and queries about his reviews. E-mail him at 72056.3226@compuserve.com. Mr. Bowman's regularly updated "Movie Takes" are available on the TAS web site — <http://www.spectator.org>.

# Buckley the Trend

## Buckley: The Right Word

William F. Buckley, Jr.

Edited by Samuel S. Vaughan

Random House / 524 pages / \$28

REVIEWED BY  
Stuart Reid

English is not William F. Buckley, Jr.'s first language, and sometimes it shows. The first two entries in the index to this collection of essays, reviews, and letters are *aargh!* and *Ab asino lanam*. As every schoolboy knows, but I didn't until I checked the reference, *Ab asino lanam* means "wool from an ass," and is employed (like "getting blood from a stone") to suggest an impossible task. *Aargh!* is rather less straightforward. On page 19 we find the eternally vigilant Buckley gently rebuking James Jackson Kilpatrick for using the expression to communicate disgust. Obviously, Kilpatrick had forgotten his Swinburne, for, as Buckley reminds us, Swinburne used *aargh!* to "express orgasmic delight in one of his vapulatory fantasies." The right word for disgust is "ugh," says Buckley.

Well, okay, sure; but *vapulatory* fantasies? Mother of God. You won't find "vapulatory" in the *Collins English Dictionary* or in *The Oxford Reference Dictionary*, or even in the 100-page lexicon of Buckley's favorite words at the end of this book, but you will find "vapulate" in the *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (the one used by the National Scrabble Club of Great Britain). It means to flog or to be flogged, depending on whether it is used transitively or intransitively. Take your pick. Swinburne certainly did.

It's easy to mock Buckley for his love of cruel and unusual words, but he can

look after himself. This book is devoted to language, more or less (though see below), and Buckley really socks it to the word-wimps. One picks the right word for the job, he says, and too bad (though here I paraphrase) if the word means zilch to *National Review* readers who live west of the Hudson and drive pick-up trucks with "Big Bubba Is Watching You" stickers on their bumpers. When Buckley says that "we tend to believe that a word is unfamiliar because it is unfamiliar to us," he speaks a great truth. On the other hand, sometimes a word is unfamiliar to us because it really is unfamiliar. I checked "vapulatory" with a Fellow of Gonville and Caius (Cambridge), a Fellow of All Souls (Oxford), and with Dot Wordsworth, who writes "Mind your language" in the (London) *Spectator*. Not one of them knew its meaning.

Much as I revere Buckley—life without him would be a bitch, not to say a vapulatory nightmare—I find it hard to take this book as seriously as, to judge from the cod eighteenth-century typog-

raphy of its cover, it takes itself. It is, as you would expect, a monument to Buckley's charm, wit, erudition, and courtesy. But it also reminds us that Buckley has gone the way of many great men and spawned a Cult. Here (hot and sticky from page 133) is a letter from a not-so-secret admirer:

Dear Mr. Buckley:

Several months ago on a Saturday morning I began introducing my (then) eighteen-month-old daughter to various public figures [on television].... She quickly, and first, mastered your name. Now—she points to you and says, "Buckey".... You may be interested in the company you keep. She also identifies, with much zeal, Jesus and Moses: the latter name sometimes being given mistakenly to Robert Bork. Although she will sometimes identify "Kenney" (J.F. Kennedy) for my wife, who is more liberal than I, she does not have a clue to the identity of Roseanne Barr, Geraldo Rivera, or Oprah Winfrey....

Ugh! (Or maybe *aargh!*) Many of us would find it difficult to know who to shoot: the kid or her father. For Buckley, no doubt, the problem would be *whom* to shoot. In fact, being too kind for his own good, or maybe too good for his own kind, he spared them both, and included the letter in his Notes & Asides column, whence it found its way into this book.

It is not Buckley's fault, however, that *Buckley: The Right Word* sometimes strikes the wrong note. The blame lies with Samuel S. Vaughan, the man who collected, assembled, and edited these pieces, and whom you will find in the index between Vatican II and *velleity*. Vaughan, who was for many years Buckley's editor at Doubleday, is now Leader of the Cult. His tone is hagiographical. "Bill Buckley...seldom uses or resorts to



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