

# GOVERNMENT AGAINST THE PEOPLE IN THE USA: REFLECTIONS ON THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *WACO: THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT*



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From about 1950 to the mid-1980s, it was politically fashionable among socialists throughout the world to be highly critical of, if not extremely hostile towards, the government of the United States of America. In large measure, this was due to the belief that, while the Soviet Union may have been far from perfect, it was vaguely considered to be somehow more righteous, at least in its economic policy, than the US, which it subjected to a deluge of hostile propaganda. In 1989-91, the Soviet empire collapsed, and socialism (in the sense of the desire for the central planning of a nationalised economy) disappeared without trace with it. As a result, the anti-American tendency has almost completely vanished from conventional wisdom. Today the consensus is that American government is a model of excellence. Bill Clinton gets an extremely good press from the mainstream media both at home and abroad. Virtually no major newspaper or broadcasting network in the United States will say a word against him. Yet in Britain one hears all sorts of things about the Clinton administration that make the Watergate scandal, which brought down Richard Nixon, look trivial by comparison. Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, formerly the Washington correspondent of the *Sunday Telegraph*, revealed a number of astonishing revelations about the President and the First Lady which no major American media organisation would touch with a ten-foot barge-pole. Several individuals who had knowledge embarrassing to the administration have died under mysterious circumstances, supposedly as “suicides” or “accidents”, and there is evidence which strongly suggests that their

autopsies have been tampered with. The head of the FBI was sacked and replaced by a Clinton appointee who has turned it into virtually a private detective agency of the President, in violation of measures to ensure the Bureau’s political independence, and illegally used to spy on the administrations political opponents. Sworn testimony is said to exist that the President has been involved in drug-dealing. (This would not be objectionable from a libertarian point of view were it not for the fact that the US taxpayer pays billions annually for the international “war on drugs”, which is violating the rights of the individual in the US, the UK and numerous other countries.) There are all sorts of revelations about illegal political campaign financing and other forms of corruption. Yet unless Americans could obtain a copy of the *Sunday Telegraph*, or picked up information on certain Internet websites or talk radio shows, they would be completely in the dark about these revelations.

## THE DRUGS HAVE WON

The “war on drugs” which was declared by George Bush in 1989, is being fought with ever greater severity, despite the obvious fact that the drugs have won. Wholesale breaches of banking privacy, legal rights, the presumption of innocence and the right to private property have been imposed in pursuit of this lost war. The confiscation of private property which the authorities believe might have been purchased with the proceeds of drug money has become a major source of government revenue. I read somewhere — although I do not know how accurate the claim is — that the US government has confiscated more private property through such drug seizures than was nationalised by the Soviet government in seventy five years of communist rule. The failure of the “war on drugs” is demonstrated by the fact that the amount of illegal drugs in circulation is about five times greater than it was a decade ago. The Clinton administration’s response has been merely to increase the ferocity and scope of what is, in fact, the war on freedom.

## THE ISRAELI CONNECTION

Another distinctive feature of the Clinton administration has been the dramatic increase in the power of the pro-Israeli lobby in American institutions and government. The Central Intelligence Agency and Mossad have forged links so close that they have been virtually merged into a single

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organisation. Such is the power of the pro-Israeli lobby in Congress that it has become impossible for any American politician to criticise any action of the state of Israel, or the massive US financial and military support for that state, and remain in office. A recent investigation in the British daily paper the *Independent* revealed that the Israeli government is now helping itself to military supplies from US arsenals at will on a vast scale, entirely bypassing the need for Congressional approval. Tanks, fighter planes, warships, missiles and other *materiële* from US inventories are simply transferred to the Israeli government on demand by permanent officials, at the American taxpayers' expense and without any control by the Americans over how, and against whom, these weapons are to be used. Although the US has a Freedom of Information Act, these transfers are generally marked "classified" on national security grounds.

Last year, for instance, Israeli forces fired a missile at an ambulance in southern Lebanon, which they are occupying in breach of international law, and killed the driver and several patients inside it. The Israelis suspected that the driver was a member of the guerrilla organisation Hamas, which proved to be untrue. When the fragments of the missile were retrieved, it was discovered that they contained the code number 01, signifying that it had been manufactured for the American forces, and therefore removed from their inventory by the Israelis. One can imagine the outcry from the Irish lobby, or indeed any American concerned about the integrity and independence of his country, if the British government were able to help itself to American arsenals in this way to supply its forces in Northern Ireland. No major American newspaper or broadcasting network would have dared to carry the *Independent's* story, such is the taboo in the US against even the most moderate criticism of the actions of the state of Israel or its influence on the United States. Those individuals, such as Professor Noam Chomsky, who courageously defy that taboo are subjected to media blackouts, character assassinations, attempts to prevent them from speaking, and threats to their careers.

### **ATF: ENEMY OF FREEDOM**

In addition, a series of recent events have demonstrated that the relationship between the US Federal government and the people has taken a new and disturbing turn. In 1992, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), a Federal agency long notorious for its hostility to private gun ownership, and its illegal entrapment of gun owners and dealers, received considerable bad publicity when it attacked the family of Randy Weaver in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, on account of alleged firearms offences. The ATF shot dead Mr Weaver's wife, who was holding their baby in her arms, as well as a neighbour and the family's dog. In February 1993, immediately after Bill Clinton took office, the ATF sought to improve its image with a raid on the premises of the Branch Davidians, a religious organisation based in Waco, Texas, which the ATF claimed was engaged in the illegal accumulation of fully-automatic rifles. The siege of the Mount Carmel Center in Waco ended with an FBI assault with tanks, the outbreak of three separate fires within the compound, and

the deaths of 76 Branch Davidians, a number of them young children.

Two years after the Waco tragedy came the bombing of the ATF office in the Federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and the subsequent allegations of an official cover-up. For some mysterious reason, the staff of the ATF office were given the day off on the day of the bombing, and the Federal authorities prevented an independent forensic examination of the bomb site. Although Timothy McVeigh has been convicted of the bombing, there are allegations, yet to be proven or disproven, of a major conspiracy by the authorities to blame the bombing on the militia movement, a collection of organisations of armed Americans who are concerned about what is happening in their country, and who are lawfully and constitutionally organising to defend their freedoms, and who are prepared, in the most extreme circumstances, to use force to do so if necessary. The Oklahoma City bombing was followed by an immediate attempt by the Clinton administration to introduce laws giving the Federal authorities vast powers of surveillance over law-abiding citizens. Fortunately, this attempt was defeated. Contrary to the image of the militias presented in both the British and American mass media, its members are primarily interested in defending their rights peacefully through persuasion, education, and involvement in the political and legal systems. They entirely repudiate racism, fascism, anti-Semitism and religious intolerance — indeed, prohibit individuals who promote such views from joining them — and have members from all America's major ethnic and religious groups.

It must be said that within the militia movement, all sorts of strange ideas are being promoted. One hears about the appearance of mysterious black helicopters, about Russian and other foreign armed forces being spotted at the facilities of US armed forces, about a plot for the United Nations to take over the US government, and so on. A great deal of this is no doubt hysteria without foundation. Is it true, however, that these conspiracy theories have no basis in fact, and that practices of the Federal government under the Clinton administration are no worse than under any other US government over the past two hundred years or so?

### **A LONG FILM ABOUT KILLING**

Anyone who sees *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (US, 1996), a new film directed by William Gazecki and Dan Gifford, will have to conclude that the answer to that question is no. The film was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London on 3rd October, 1997, as part of the Human Rights Watch film festival, in the presence of Dan Gifford, one of the film's directors. It is a terrifying document about the realities of American government in the 1990s. This film will be a sobering education for anyone who naively believes that the United States government embodies the principles of individual liberty, private property rights, limitations on state power and the rule of law. This is not to blame the American people for the slaughter at Waco, any more than one can blame the Chinese people for the butchery at Tien An Men Square. But it does not alter the fact that in today's

world, the US government is enemy number one of the principles valued by libertarians. The late Polish film director Kristof Kieslowski made *A Short Film About Killing*, which concerned a murder and the subsequent execution of the killer. *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, at 135 minutes, is a long film about killing. And in this film the killing is carried out by the Federal Government of the United States of America, and there is no execution of the murderer.

The Branch Davidians are — or were — an obscure religious grouping who had some peculiar beliefs about the meaning of the “seven seals” in the Book of Revelations. Their leader, David Koresh (*né* Vernon Howell) was the leader of a group of Branch Davidians — who included a number of British subjects, both black and white — who lived at the Mount Carmel Center in Waco. There, among other activities, they lawfully traded in firearms and — as the local sheriff testifies in this film — enjoyed excellent relations with the local community. After the bad publicity the ATF received after the Ruby Ridge massacre, the Bureau wanted to improve its image, and arranged for a military-style raid on Mount Carmel with the intention of demonstrating that they were “cracking down” on “cult organisations” which were preparing for “armed actions”. Their purpose was to make an example of the Davidians, and thus to terrorise the numerous American groups, religious and secular, such as the militia movement, which lawfully possess firearms for self-defence. The ATF used a US Army facility to train for the raid, claiming — falsely — that they were preparing for a drugs raid.

In February 1993 the ATF obtained a search warrant for the premises of the Branch Davidians. They claimed that the Davidians possessed 48 illegal automatic weapons, as well as hand grenades. The ATF had invited the media to the scene, and a reporter tipped off the Davidians that the raid was about to take place. When the ATF began their raid, they did so with maximum force, firing on the Davidians with a range of weapons, and killing and injuring a number of them. The Davidians returned fire, killing four ATF members and wounding others. Such were the circumstances of this initial raid that a Texas jury found that the Davidians had carried out justifiable homicide in defending their home against attack, and acquitted the surviving Davidians of murder. Then the Davidians allowed the ATF, who had run out of ammunition, to retreat without being fired on. Thus began a two-month siege in which the FBI took control of the situation from the ATF. It is obvious from the evidence compiled in this film that the FBI wanted revenge, and were not going to let the Davidians out alive under any circumstances. The negotiators who continuously communicated with the Davidians by phone had no power, and repeatedly lied to the Davidians, as the tape recordings used in this film demonstrate. On April 19th, knowing that there were large numbers of children in the Carmel Center, the Feds, acting under orders from Janet Reno, Attorney General in the Clinton Administration, moved into the building with tanks, and fired inflammable CS gas missiles into the building. Then three separate fires broke out in the building, turning the CS gas into hydrogen cyanide, which killed most of the people inside, including children, in a

horrible fashion. The Feds refused to allow fire engines to approach the blazing building, raised the flag of the ATF on the building’s flagpole, and took trophy photographs. The FBI claimed that they did not fire a single round in the final assault on Mount Carmel; yet infra-red video footage taken from a surveillance plane two miles above the scene clearly shows automatic fire coming from the tanks and other positions into the building during the assault. Either the FBI was lying, or some other armed force — perhaps the US Army or even a foreign force — was firing those rounds, rather than FBI personnel. Altogether, seventy six Davidians were killed. Autopsies on the bodies demonstrated that they had been shot. The FBI claimed that they had carried out a mass suicide. The evidence in this film demonstrates that they were the victims of a mass murder.

### A MONUMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT

The film-makers have sifted through a vast amount of video recording of the siege, including video tapes of the Davidians themselves, audio tapes of the negotiations between the Federal negotiators and the Davidians, and footage of the Congressional hearings which followed the siege, and have recorded numerous interviews with participants, experts and survivors, to produce a documentary film which is at once a monumental achievement in the field of investigative reporting and a superb example of documentary cinema. They have uncovered a story of the deliberate suppression and destruction of vital evidence, including the disappearance of the front door of the Carmel Center, riddled with bullets which would have demonstrated that the ATF opened fire first; the disappearances of reports on the damage to the tanks involved in the final attack; the complete destruction of the Mount Carmel Center after the raid in order to prevent an independent forensic examination; and the disappearance of vital video and audio material, such as the ATF’s video recording of the initial raid and a doctor’s tapes made during the autopsies on the Davidians who died in the final assault. They tell the story in such a way that by turns it grips and horrifies the viewer from the first minute to the last. It is doubtful whether any Hollywood feature film of the past decade can compete with this true story in terms of tension, drama, tragedy and pathos.

If forced to make a criticism of this superlative film, it would be that it seeks to condense too much information into its timespan. The film of the Congressional hearings on the siege contain a vast amount of information which comes at the viewer like one of the machine-guns the FBI fired during its final assault. It is not always easy to remember exactly which speaker had which role during the siege. It might have been worth expanding the length of the film in order to enable the viewer to more easily absorb the wealth of information that is presented. But such a criticism is trivial next to the seminal importance of the information which the film conveys.

The facts revealed in *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* will be an education for those on both sides of the Atlantic who believe that the United States government can do no wrong. At the time, the mainstream media both here and in the US presented the Waco siege as a struggle be-

tween the noble and admirable forces of law and order on the one hand, and the evil threat posed by the murderous “cult members” in their “bunker”. As I write these words, the British government is protesting to the Saudi Arabian authorities about the sentences, involving five hundred lashes, passed on two British nurses who have been convicted of various offences in a Saudi court of law. By contrast, I recall no newspaper reports of the British government making representations to the US government during the Waco siege on behalf of the Queen’s subjects at the Mount Carmel Center who were eventually murdered without trial by a foreign police force operating in violation of the laws of its own country.

Dan Gifford, one of the film’s directors, was present at the screening, and explained the problems that the film is experiencing in reaching a wide audience. No television station the length and breadth of the United States will even consider broadcasting such a political hot potato. Neither will any American film distributor touch it, both from political and commercial reasons. It has been shown to tiny audiences at a couple of the smaller film festivals, one or two independent art-house cinemas, and at private meetings of dissident groups. The view which the Clinton administration and the American media have promoted, that the Davidians were a bunch of evil, gun-toting cop-killers, has generally prevailed, for the simple reason that virtually nobody has seen or heard the evidence to the contrary. After the siege, the survivors were acquitted of murder but convicted of such offences as “carrying a weapon at a Federal crime scene” and received prison sentences of forty and fifty years in separate Federal penitentiaries, where, Mr Gifford told me, they are being regularly beaten up by both guards and prisoners. Fortunately, appeals are currently in progress against these sentences.

#### **DOCUMENTARIES CANNOT BE “OBJECTIVE”**

Defenders of the Clinton administration will doubtless accuse the film-makers of bias in favour of the Davidians. Yet “bias” is inherent in the very nature of documentary film. Either the documentary film-maker sets out to make a film about something that has not yet happened, and therefore films events as they are taking place before the camera, or he compiles a film from footage of a past event that already exists, perhaps supplemented by interviews and commentary about it. In case of Waco, the film-makers were faced with a vast mass of material with which to work, including archive footage, stills, video tapes, documents, eyewitnesses and experts to interview. The documentarian has to adopt a “point of view”, or interpretation, of the events he or she is dealing with which acts as a framework in which the selected material is incorporated. This interpretation will inevitably reflect the film-maker’s assumptions and beliefs about the subject of the film. The point was clearly made by Joris Ivens, the Dutch socialist film-maker who directed *The Spanish Earth* (US, 1937), a documentary about the experience of a village in the Spanish civil war, in which the villagers’ project for irrigating their newly-acquired land is compared with the military struggle for the defence of the Spanish republic. Ivens describes how the film, which has a commentary written and spoken by Ernest Heming-

way, was accused of “lack of objectivity” for its unreserved support for the Republican position:

I was often asked, why hadn’t we gone to the other side, too, and made an objective film? My only answer was that a documentary film maker has to have an opinion on such vital issues as fascism or anti-fascism — he has to have feelings about these issues, if his work is to have any dramatic or emotional or art value. And too, there is the very simple fact to consider, that when you are in a war and you get to the other side, you are shot or put into a prison camp — you cannot be on both sides, neither as a soldier nor as a film maker. If anyone wanted that objectivity of “both sides of the question,” he would have to show two films, *The Spanish Earth* and a film by a fascist film maker, if he could find one.

This was actually done once: The London Film Society showed two films of the Ethiopian war [of 1935-6], side by side — one made by a crew of Soviet cameramen, and the other by an Italian crew. You were given the evidence against any possible “objectivity” when you saw, in the Italian film, the decorative, flower-like effects of the exploding bombs as seen from the bombing planes, and, in the other, the death, the maiming, the bleeding, and the blinding caused by those same bombs.

I was surprised to find that many people automatically assumed that any documentary film would inevitably be objective ... Do we demand objectivity in the evidence presented at a trial? No, the only demand is that each piece of evidence be as full a subjective, truthful, honest presentation of the witness’s attitude as an oath on the Bible can produce from him.

I think that Ernest Hemingway ... defined the documentary film’s job completely satisfactorily in his definition of the writer’s job:

“A writer’s problem does not change. He himself changes, but his problem remains the same. It is always how to write truly and having found what is true, to project it in such a way that it becomes a part of the experience of the person who reads it.”

I would like to add that a militant documentary film has to reach further. After informing and moving audiences, it should agitate — mobilize them to become active in connection with the problems shown in the film. ... A documentary film maker has the sense of participating directly in the world’s most fundamental issues.<sup>1</sup>

If *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* encourages Americans to take a stand in the defence of their ever-diminishing freedoms, and educates people in other countries as to what is really going on in the United States, it will have more than fulfilled the task which Ivens assigned to the documentary film.

#### **NOTE**

1. Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I*, Seven Seas Publishers, East Berlin, 1969, pp. 136-137.