

FBI's Point Man at Waco Leads Probe

The
Washington
Post

The Washington Post

April 28, 1995 | Susan Schmidt

Throughout the 51-day standoff at Waco, Tex., that culminated in the fiery deaths of the Branch Davidians, Bob Ricks was a symbol of the FBI. He was the voice of the federal government in telephone negotiations with cult leader David Koresh, and he spoke for the agency at daily news briefings.

Now, in an odd twist, Ricks will lead the Oklahoma City investigation of a bombing that may have had roots in that deadly law enforcement confrontation two years ago.

Rick's public identification with the Waco siege is so strong that there has been speculation that the bombers may have been targeting Ricks himself, although law enforcement officials privately discounted that theory yesterday.

The bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building occurred on the second anniversary of the tragic end to the confrontation in Waco -- a fire that federal officials say was set by Koresh and his followers. Four federal agents and 81 Branch Davidians, including children, died in the initial raid and the fire at the end of the siege.

Oklahoma bombing suspect Timothy James McVeigh is known to have been incensed about the government's actions at Waco, and even showed up outside the Branch Davidian compound during the long standoff. Authorities found a piece of paper referring to the Waco events in McVeigh's car after his arrest last week, and they believe the Oklahoma bombing was an act of retaliation.

FBI Special Agent Weldon L. Kennedy said yesterday that Ricks, who runs the FBI's Oklahoma field office, will have long-term responsibility for overseeing the bombing investigation there.

Kennedy said the Oklahoma bureau is now in a "crisis mode," with dozens of agents from around the country on the scene. Ricks, said Kennedy, is "not only coordinating those activities, but will for the long haul be the individual who, as far as the FBI is concerned, is in charge of the investigative activities."

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, which launched the initial raid on the Branch Davidian compound, had a field office in the Oklahoma City federal building and it may have been a target for the bombers, federal officials said.

The FBI's Oklahoma City bureau is several miles away. Some investigators said they believe McVeigh and other suspects would have known that, and that Ricks therefore was not their target.

Ricks's having a role in both Waco and the bombing probe is "ironic but purely coincidental," said Joe Tooley, a Dallas attorney representing about 70 ATF agents who participated in the Waco raid. "Only the bombers can tell us what they were trying to do," he said.

Those ATF agents -- two of whom are now assigned to the Oklahoma City office destroyed in the bombing -- are suing Waco news organizations and others for allegedly alerting the Branch Davidians that a raid was imminent.

Henry S. Ruth, a former Justice Department official who served as an independent reviewer of the ATF's internal report on Waco, said he expects top FBI officials in Washington to essentially run the probe. He said he is not surprised to see Ricks at the helm in Oklahoma City.

"The FBI is a very militaristic organization. If it happened in this guy's territory, they'll put him in charge," said Ruth.

Ricks was assigned to Waco because he was nearby in the Oklahoma office and had experience as a deputy assistant director of criminal investigations in Washington. A week after the siege ended, Ricks told an Oklahoma newspaper that Koresh wanted "as much carnage as possible." Ricks also was critical of extremists who came to Waco during the confrontation.

"The nuts started appearing in town," he said in the interview. "They thought this was a typical right-wing hate-type group. What attracted the nuts was that they had killed four federal officers, so they thought they must be okay."

But threats to federal agents from those groups died down, Ricks said. He told the newspaper that the groups lost interest when they learned that Koresh was not a white supremacist -- that there were blacks, Hispanics and Asians in the compound with him. Staff writers Paul Duggan in Oklahoma City and Pierre Thomas in Washington contributed to this report.