

FBI official had unblemished rise until incident

By RICHARD LEIBY
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WASHINGTON — A few weeks ago, a federal law enforcement official was asked to render an opinion of his colleague, Larry Potts. "Can you turn off the tape recorder for a moment?" the official said.

He proceeded to sing high praises of Potts: "He's a great guy, based on all of my interaction with him. He's always been an honest, forthright person of integrity, hard-working, a loyal civil servant."

All that, of course, could be put on the record. "But," the official added, "I really don't know anything about Ruby Ridge."

Questions about Potts's role in the 1992 Idaho siege come up in any assessment of the 47-year-old FBI veteran, who has enjoyed an otherwise unblemished rise up through the ranks since joining the bureau in Pittsburgh in 1974.

In official circles, he is regarded as honest and competent. Some observers also portray him as a consummate careerist.

The only dark spot in his record, they say, is his handling of the 1992 shooting of Vicki Weaver at Ruby Ridge, which led to an official reprimand earlier this year and now has become a potential black eye for the bureau.

With a new investigation of FBI conduct during and after the siege now underway, the judgment of Potts's greatest advocate, FBI Director Louis J. Freeh, also has come under

criticism. He pushed Potts for promotion earlier this year not long after censuring him for inadequate supervision of Ruby Ridge.

As a special Justice Department prosecutor, Freeh got to know and admire Potts during a 1990 multi-agency investigation of a mail-bombing that killed a federal judge and civil rights attorney.

When Freeh needed a deputy, Potts seemed a natural choice — one of the bureau's "handful of stars," says a former top Justice Department official.

On May 2, appointing Potts to oversee the Oklahoma City federal building bombing investigation, Freeh said of Potts: "He is completely dedicated to the rule of law. He is the very best the FBI has."

But the former official pointed out that one of the bureau's persistent problems is its relatively small pool of qualified top management choices. Another source — an outsider with many FBI contacts — said the view among some agents is that "Potts is competent and knowledgeable but not totally to be trusted."

Attorney General Janet Reno, in announcing Potts's promotion, seemed to distance herself from the selection, twice quoting Freeh's glowing appraisals before offering her opinion of Potts as "an extraor-

dinary agent."

As the official in charge of decision-making in the Branch Davidian siege near Waco, Tex., Potts was instrumental in advising Reno to proceed with a tear gas and tank assault on the cult compound on April 19, 1993. She has since faced many probing questions about that decision.

Potts was among bureau officials who expressed confidence the action would not spark a suicidal response by sect leader David Koresh.

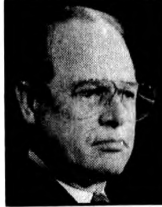
Potts has given few interviews, and the FBI has released little personal material about him. A 1969 graduate of the University of Richmond, he lives unassumingly in a

country-club style subdivision near Leesburg, Va., with his wife and three daughters.

For much of his career, Potts has been removed from the limelight, overseeing corruption and white-collar crime investigations. He has served in Denver, Boston and Washington.

He was the case agent who handled the bureau's contact with Teamsters boss Jackie Presser, who was informing for the FBI but still maintaining Mob ties.

"Larry dealt with Presser very discreetly and positively," said Oliver B. Revell, the FBI's former associate deputy director and Potts's boss at the time.



Potts

