

Ex-FBI Agent's Book Takes Second-Guessers to Task - Insider's Account Details Agency's Decision-Making

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Native Texan Danny O. Coulson never flinched when he faced off with machete-wielding prison rioters, murderous white supremacists, cop-killing black guerrillas or even Department of Justice attorneys.

He says the attorneys threatened his 31-year FBI career as much as any criminal threatened his life.

So in 1997, after a two-year Department of Justice investigation cleared him of responsibility for a fatal shooting during a siege of survivalists on Idaho's Ruby Ridge, Mr. Coulson retired as special agent in charge of the Dallas FBI office.

Mr. Coulson, who was at FBI headquarters in Washington during that siege, used the following two years on forced administrative leave to begin a book, *No Heroes*, with author and Time magazine Washington correspondent Elaine Shannon.

It is filled with details on the FBI's decision-making processes during several critical investigations and events over the last two decades. And it is spiced with Mr. Coulson's criticism of alleged Justice Department backbiters and Monday morning quarterbacks.

Retirement was a painful decision for a man who seemingly had always been at the forefront of dangerous law enforcement operations.

"But they came after us with criminal investigators," Mr. Coulson said. "It was an outrage."

Mr. Coulson, the first commander of the FBI's elite hostage-rescue team, survived gunbattles with killers on the streets of New York. He persuaded the leader of the terrorist-sponsoring Covenant, Sword and Army of the Lord to surrender without a shot on the shores of Bull Shoals in northern Arkansas. And he confronted Cuban Marielitos, armed with crude swords and machetes, in the bowels of an Atlanta prison to persuade them to surrender hostages without a battle.

When Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh was arrested in April 1995, it was a team headed by Mr. Coulson that put the mass murderer on a helicopter and flew him to prison facilities at Tinker Air Force Base.

Mr. McVeigh was concerned that he would be killed before he could be brought to trial, Mr. Coulson writes of the man eventually convicted of killing 168 people, including several infants and toddlers, at the Oklahoma City federal building.

Mr. Coulson expresses disdain for J. Edgar Hoover's desire to keep blacks and other minorities out of the FBI or in minor posts within the agency. And he said he absolutely disagrees with federal decisions to engage in confrontations that are likely to lead to gunfire - as happened with survivalist Randy Weaver at his mountain home on Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidians at Waco.

The title of his book grew from his belief that there are no heroes whenever people die during an armed standoff.

Mr. Coulson faults prosecutors in Idaho for insisting on serving an arrest warrant for selling two sawed-off shotguns on Mr. Weaver at his fortified cabin in rugged terrain on Ruby Ridge.

The effort led to a confrontation in which Mr. Weaver's Labrador retriever was shot by deputy marshals and agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. A battle erupted in which Kevin Harris, an associate of Mr. Weaver's, killed Deputy Marshal Bill Degan. Federal fire fatally wounded Sammy Weaver, Mr. Weaver's 14-year-old son.

Days after the two survivalists retreated to the Weaver cabin, an FBI sniper fired at Mr. Harris and accidentally killed Mr. Weaver's wife, Vicki.

Eventually, the two men surrendered.

Mr. Weaver was later acquitted on federal charges of engaging in a conspiracy to lure federal agents to his property for the purpose of killing them.

"What had started this crazy business?" Mr. Coulson writes. "A lousy ATF case involving two guns that had nothing to do with crime in the United States.

"At the same time that we were trying to find more FBI agents to send into high-crime areas to reclaim our streets, we had a federal agency chasing after a mountain man who had produced a couple of sawed-off shotguns."

Mr. Coulson, reflecting on those days, said this week that while he has little use for Mr. Weaver, "he should have been left alone on top of his mountain."

"I don't have any quarrel with ATF agents," Mr. Coulson said. "I have a lot of problems with their leadership. I think they led their people into a deathtrap at Waco."

Mr. Coulson writes that ATF leaders were told in advance of their 1993 raid on the heavily armed Branch Davidian compound near Waco that the group's leader, David Koresh, had been warned they were coming.

The raid was not called off. Four ATF agents were shot to death. Several Branch Davidians were killed in the gunbattle, and Mr. Koresh and about 80 other Davidians later died after they set fire to their compound.

Today, Mr. Coulson works as a security consultant and lectures, sometimes at the request of the FBI, to law students studying methods for building major investigations.

He says he is not bitter about his departure from the FBI.

"There is life after the FBI," he said. "It's just not quite as exciting. I had 31 years in the FBI, and 29 of them were the greatest adventure anyone could imagine."

He is scheduled to appear at 3 p.m. Saturday to sign books at Barnes & Noble, 1217 State Highway 114 West, Suite 112, in Grapevine.