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WACO CULT DISASTER REINFORCES TEXAS: GUN-VIOLENCE IMAGE

BY PETER COONEY

HOUSTON, TEXAS, APRIL 21, REUTER - TEXAS POLITICIANS SAY THE WACO SIEGE COULD HAVE HAPPENED ANYWHERE, BUT THE TRAGEDY, WHICH BEGAN AND ENDED WITH VIOLENCE AND DEATH, BUTTRESSED THE STATE:S PISTOL-PACKING IMAGE AND COULD REKINDLE THE GUN CONTROL DEBATE.

RICE UNIVERSITY SOCIOLOGIST STEPHEN KLINEBERG SAID MANY PEOPLE WOULD PROBABLY SEE THE DISASTER AS HAVING MORE TO DO WITH RELIGIOUS FANATICISM AND FEI TACTICS THAN CRIME IN TEXAS. BUT IT CERTAINLY FITS WITH THE STEREOTYPE,:: HE SAID. IT OFFERS ONE ADDITIONAL PIECE OF DATA TO THIS SENSE THAT TEXAS HAS GOT TO FIND A WAY TO MOVE MORE SUCCESSFULLY AWAY FROM THE FRONTIER, GUN-TOTING MENTALITY:::

HOUSTON, TEXAS:S MOST POPULOUS CITY, RANKS AS THE U.S. GUN DEALERS: CAPITAL WITH 1,791 LICENSED TO SELL WEAPONS. IN 1991, TEXAS WAS THE ONLY STATE WHERE MORE PEOPLE DIED FROM GUNFIRE THAN IN CAR CRASHES.

TO THE CONSTERNATION OF MANY TEXANS WHO ARGUE THE STATE HAS NO MONOPOLY ON CRIME IN A VAST COUNTRY WITH A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS, THE LONE STAR STATE HAS BEEN LINKED WITH GUN-RELATED VIOLENCE SINCE THE FRONTIER DAYS OF THE WILD WEST.

THE 51-DAY SIEGE OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN CULT NEAR WACO BEGAN ON FEBRUARY 28 WITH A SHOOT-OUT-THAT ERUPTED AFTER THE U.S. BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO AND FIREARMS (ATF) TRIED TO SERVE WARRANTS ON SECT MEMBERS FOR ALLEGED WEAPONS VIOLATIONS.

FOUR ATF AGENTS DIED IN THE BATTLE AND THE CULT SAID SIX OF ITS MEMBERS WERE KILLED.

AUTHORITIES SAID LATER CULT LEADER DAVID KORESH LEGALLY BTAINED MANY OF THE WEAPONS USED AGAINST THE FEDERAL AGENTS.

KORESH IS BELIEVED TO HAVE DIED WITH 85 FOLLOWERS ON MONDAY IN THE FIRE THAT DESTROYED THEIR COMPOUND.

SOME OF THE WEAPONS INSIDE WERE ORDERED RETURNED TO THE CULT BY A STATE JUDGE AFTER KORESH AND SEVEN OTHERS WERE ACQUITTED IN 1988 OF TRYING TO KILL A RIVAL LEADER.

OFFICIALS SAID THE WEAPONS INCLUDED CRATES OF AMMUNITION AND M-16S, COMPACT UZI-TYPE AUTOMATIC WEAPONS, AND HANDGUNS INCLUDING .357-CALIBRE PISTOLS.

THE ATF SAID IT HAD NO RECORD OF KORESH HAVING A GUN LICENCE BUT WACO OFFICIALS SAID THE WEAPONS RETURNED TO HIM AFTER THE TRIAL WERE LEGALLY PURCHASED FROM TEXAS GUN DEALERS.

VARIOUS REPORTS HAVE SAID KORESH WAS KNOWN TO FREQUENT GUN SHOWS IN HOUSTON, ABOUT 180 MILES (290 KM) SOUTHEAST OF WACO.

TEXAS:S VIOLENT LEGACY INCLUDES THE 1963 ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT JOHN KENNEDY IN DALLAS, FOLLOWED TWO DAYS LATER BY THE SLAYING BY JACK RUBY OF KENNEDY:S ALLEGED ASSASSIN, LEE HARVEY UNCLASSIFIED

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OSWALD, AT THE DALLAS CITY JAIL.

IN 1965, CHARLES WHITMAN SHOT 14 PEOPLE DEAD FROM THE TOWER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS IN AUSTIN. IN 1991, 23 PEOPLE DIED IN A SHOOTING RAMPAGE BY A GUNMAN AT A RESTAURANT IN KILLEEN, TEXAS.

THE STATE HAS NO GUN REGISTRATION LAW. VIOLENT CRIMINALS AND PEOPLE INTOXICATED OR ON DRUGS ARE PROHIBITED FROM BUYING GUNS, BUT STATE LAW REQUIRES NO BACKGROUND CHECKS.

THE STATE LEGISLATURE IS CONSIDERING A BILL THAT WOULD ALLOW PEOPLE TO CARRY CONCEALED WEAPONS. A RECENT POLL SHOWS TEXANS ARE SPLIT ON THE MEASURE, WHICH HAS BEEN PASSED BY A HOUSE COMMITTEE BUT FACES A VETO BY GOVERNOR ANN RICHARDS.

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