

Janet Reno, attorney general who gave order for mass murder in Waco, Texas, dead at 78

By Fred Mazelis
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Janet Reno, the Clinton administration attorney general during the 1990s who died on Monday at the age of 78, will above all be remembered for her role in the horrific US federal assault against the Branch Davidian religious cult in April 1993, at a cost of more than 80 lives, including those of 21 children.

Reno, who was born in Miami, Florida and was state attorney for Miami-Dade County for 14 years, was nominated to head the US Justice Department in February 1993. Clinton, the first successful Democratic presidential candidate since Jimmy Carter 16 years earlier, had already been in office for almost a month. He had suffered the embarrassment, however, of two successive nominees to the attorney general position having been forced to withdraw their names after media reports that they had both employed nannies who were undocumented immigrants. Having pledged to appoint a woman to the post, he then turned to Reno, who was unmarried and had no “nanny problem.”

Only two months after taking office, the new attorney general made headlines around the world when she ordered the brutal assault by dozens of federal agents on the Branch Davidian complex in Waco. The attack ended a 51-day siege that began in February, when an earlier raid had led to the deaths of six Branch Davidians and four federal agents.

The April 19 assault triggered a massive fire in which almost all of the victims met horrific deaths. The lives of scores of innocent people, including defenseless children, were considered collateral damage as the administration, through Attorney General Reno, sent a message that any defiance of the ruling class would meet with a ruthless and bloody response.

The Waco assault was in line with infamous previous examples of ruling class ferocity, including the assault on the Attica, New York prison rebellion in 1971 that

led to 43 deaths, the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973, and the bombing of the headquarters of another religious cult, the Philadelphia-based black nationalist MOVE group, in 1985.

The Davidians were a tiny and obscure religious fundamentalist sect led by David Koresh. Tracing their theological origins to the Seventh Day Adventists, they combined ultra-right views with apocalyptic visions. Whatever the character of the Davidians’ religious fanaticism and political backwardness, however, the federal assault was a warning of the ruthlessness with which the capitalist state would respond to a genuine mass struggle by the working class.

As the *International Workers Bulletin*, US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, declared in its report of April 26, 1993, just a week after the attack: “There is an obvious and enormous discrepancy between the scale of the force used against the Branch Davidians and the actual threat which this tiny religious group represented. This disproportion reveals the tremendous nervousness of the capitalist ruling class, which presides over a society wracked by economic crisis and deepening poverty, unemployment and homelessness. So fearful is the ruling class of the explosive potential of the deep-rooted social antagonisms in America that it reacts with frenzied violence against any challenge, no matter how minor. It seeks to drive home the message, ‘Thus perish enemies of the state.’”

In addition to setting the precedent for future repression, the Waco massacre also fed the propaganda of ultra-right and fascist elements, who adopted the Branch Davidians as a cause celebre for their own purposes. Exactly two years to the day after the assault on Waco, Timothy McVeigh carried out the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building, an act of

individual terror that killed 168 people. To this day elements of the extreme right, including the fascist elements that have been emboldened by the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, focus on Waco as a means of prosecuting their own war against the working class.

Reno's term in office lasted more than seven years after Waco, and she was involved in a number of other high-profile cases, most prominently that of Elian Gonzalez, the 6-year-old Cuban boy who was rescued at sea after his mother perished in a risky attempt to cross from Cuba to the United States. Reno presided as Elian was returned to his father in Cuba, a decision that enraged ultra-right Cuban exiles when it took place in 2000.

The most significant of Reno's decisions, however, was that concerning Waco. The fact that the Waco assault came so early in the Clinton administration was not coincidental. Just as the new president had to signal that his days as a student protester against the war in Vietnam had long since passed, Reno, the first woman to head the US Justice Department, felt the need to demonstrate that she would be merciless in her defense of the state.

Almost every news headline noting Reno's death has highlighted her allegedly trailblazing role as the first female Attorney General. After 23 years, the novelty of her appointment has long since worn off. The intervening period has seen the appointment of two female secretaries of state (Madeline Albright, followed by Hillary Clinton), two female national security advisors (Condoleezza Rice, followed by Susan Rice), and numerous other women in top positions in the administrations of Bill Clinton, George Bush and Barack Obama, not to mention women rulers in other parts of the world, and the candidacy of Hillary Clinton seeking to become the first woman US president. It should be obvious that there have been no changes in policy and no "softening" of police repression or imperialist aggression because women have occupied these posts.

President Obama and Bill and Hillary Clinton issued statements lauding former the Attorney General in the hours after her death. Obama said that Reno was "tough as nails, and never cowered in her fight for what was right." The Clintons, in their joint statement, mentioned gun control and other issues. Significantly, neither Obama nor the Clintons made any mention of

Waco. They would just as soon keep that crucial side of Reno's career quiet, while other such crimes are being prepared today.

The lessons drawn by the WWSWS after Waco have lost none of their immediacy and importance. Hundreds of victims—black, white, Hispanic and immigrant—are killed by police bullets or by other means every year, and the official story is that they exhibited signs of disobedience or lack of cooperation. This loss of life, including those of countless mentally ill as well as others, unarmed and innocent of any crime, are seen as collateral damage in the fight to maintain "law and order." Every time a cop walks free after such a killing, which is virtually always, the message is the same as at Waco. This is the nature of the capitalist state, despite all the claims of democracy. Its purpose is organized violence to be carried out on behalf of the tiny ruling elite and against the working class, the vast majority of the population.

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