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The greatest hits

The past nine years have not been stellar for the Federal Bureau of Investigation—to say the least. The agency is still taking hits for allegedly bungling major cases, some that ended in tragedy. Following are some of the most controversial actions leading up to and during the Freeh years.

Jump to:

RUBY RIDGE

Aug. 21, 1992: U.S. marshals approach white separatist **Randy Weaver**'s log cabin in **Ruby Ridge, Idaho**, to arrest him for failing to appear in court on gun charges. In the ensuing gunfight, a deputy U.S. marshal, William Degan, and Weaver's 14-year-old son, Sammy, are killed. The FBI is called in. The next day, FBI sniper **Lon Horiuchi** wounds Weaver and his friend, Kevin Harris, and fires a controversial shot that kills Weaver's wife, Vicki, as she stands behind the door of the cabin, holding their 10-month-old daughter. Weaver and Harris surrender 10 days later. Weaver serves 16 months in prison on weapons charges. The feds pay \$3.1 million to Weaver and his three surviving daughters and revamp regulations on FBI rules of engagement. "Bureau performance during Ruby Ridge and after was ... terribly flawed," Freeh tells a Senate panel.

WACO

Feb. 28, 1993: Agents of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) try to serve search and arrest warrants on the **Branch Davidians**, an apocalyptic sect holed up in a compound near Waco, Texas. A 51-day standoff begins between Davidians leader **David Koresh** and the FBI. Four agents and six Davidians die in a gunfight. On April 19, an FBI tank knocks down walls, punches holes in the main building, and pours tear gas inside. Fires break out and the compound burns to the ground, killing Koresh and 80 followers, including 17 children.

OLYMPICS BOMBING

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July 27, 1996: A homemade pipe bomb explodes during the **Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta**, killing one person and injuring 111 others. Security guard **Richard Jewell**, who alerted authorities to a knapsack containing the bomb, emerges as a hero. A few days later, senior FBI agents name Jewell as a suspect. He's later exonerated and accuses the FBI of trying to trick him into confessing.

FBI CRIME LAB

April 15, 1997: The Justice Department's Inspector General concludes its 18-month-long investigation into whistleblower **Frederic Whitehurst's** allegations of **mishandling of evidence** by the FBI's crime lab. The I.G.'s report slams the once renowned crime lab for sloppy, inaccurate work and for providing testimony slanted in the prosecution's favor in several major cases, including the Oklahoma City bombing.

TWA FLIGHT 800

May 10, 1999: A Senate subcommittee raises serious questions about the FBI's probe of the July 17, 1996, **crash of TWA Flight 800** off the coast of Long Island, N.Y., in which 230 people died. Sen. Charles Grassley, an Iowa Republican, accuses the FBI of jeopardizing flight safety by trying to bottle up a Treasury Department report that blamed the crash on a **mechanical failure** and not a terrorist attack.

LOS ALAMOS

Dec. 10, 1999: Wen Ho Lee, a former nuclear weapons scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, is arrested and charged with 59 counts of illegally removing classified weapons data from the lab, in violation of the Atomic Energy and Foreign Espionage acts. Lee, suspected of **selling secrets** to China, had been dismissed from the job in March 1999. He downloaded a trove of classified weapons information but insists he is innocent. He is interrogated, polygraphed, and threatened by an FBI agent pressing for a confession. Lee is placed in near solitary confinement while awaiting trial and spends time in shackles.

Aug. 24, 2000: U.S. District Judge James Parker orders the release of Lee on \$1 million bail. On September 13, Lee pleads guilty to one felony count. The federal judge in the case apologizes to Lee for the government's conduct.

RUSSIAN SPY

Feb. 18, 2001: Longtime FBI agent Robert Philip Hanssen, a specialist in Russian counterintelligence, is arrested in a public park in

Virginia after a document drop for the Russians at an agreed location. He's charged with espionage and conspiracy to commit espionage for allegedly **selling secrets to Moscow** for 15 years before getting nabbed. He pleads not guilty May 31 and is awaiting trial in October. Hanssen could face the death penalty. Freeh is pummeled for failing to aggressively police the bureau for spies, despite telltale signs of unresolved espionage and warnings from an FBI investigator. Freeh says he will institute reforms including tougher audits on FBI computers to detect spies and a beefed-up internal security plan for the bureau. Freeh also ends up reversing his objections to polygraphs, which could subject hundreds of FBI agents to lie detector tests.

OKLAHOMA CITY

May 11, 2001: Attorney General John Ashcroft delays the execution of convicted **Oklahoma City bomber Timothy J. McVeigh**, citing the FBI's failure to turn over pertinent documents and evidence to McVeigh's attorneys. The April 1995 incident, which killed 168 people and injured hundreds, was the largest terrorist attack on U.S. soil. Some 4,000 pages of related FBI documents are recovered after 46 of 56 field offices admit they failed to follow 16 directives to turn in all records. But Justice officials say those files have no bearing on McVeigh's guilt or innocence. A federal judge agrees and refuses to stay the new June 11 execution date. But the FBI's credibility is further eroded. Freeh acknowledges the bureau's failure, taking responsibility for the FBI's management problems. He expands the ethics courses for agents in training. McVeigh abandons appeals and prepares to die.

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