

Cavanaugh (far left) and Alabama Gov. Bob Riley at a church fire site



# MORE FIRES TO EXTINGUISH

A legendary ATF agent takes on one of his most challenging cases

By Chitra Ragavan

**W**hen the phone rang at 6:30 a.m. on Friday, February 3, Special Agent in Charge James Cavanaugh had a feeling it was bad news. He was right. Arsonists had set fire to five Baptist churches in rural Bibb County, Ala., and it was up to Cavanaugh, the regional boss for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, to respond quickly.

Cavanaugh's phone has rung a lot over the course of a 32-year law enforcement career, and he's answered the call successfully more often than not. In fact, this low-key cop has been at the forefront of some of the biggest criminal investigations and hostage negotiations of the past two decades: Waco, the Unabomber case, the mid-1990s church fires throughout the South, the Atlanta Centennial Olympic Park bombing, and the Washington, D.C.-area sniper investigation. Law enforcement colleagues say Cavanaugh's work has been crucial to solving or resolving all those high-profile crimes. And they predict that Cavanaugh, an accomplished arson investigator, will have the same success with the church fires—10 so far—down in Alabama. "He absolutely has an insight," says Debra Phillips, general counsel to the U.S. attorney in Ten-

nessee's middle district, "into the mind of criminals."

Cavanaugh played a big role in investigating the rash of church fires throughout the South a decade ago, and he is not discounting how tough it will be this time around to win the trust of black pastors and congregants who still remember a time when police were often Klansmen. "Old wounds open," says Cavanaugh. But his former ATF colleague, James Pasco of the Fraternal Order of Police, says if anyone can win trust, it's Jim Cavanaugh. "The

**Dogged tenacity, a disarming sense of humor, and a love of "blood and guts law enforcement"**

political ramifications of those cases makes them extraordinarily sensitive," says Pasco. "It takes tremendous diplomacy and extraordinary people skills to keep them going." Pasco says Cavanaugh has those in abundance, along with a disarming sense of humor and dogged tenacity.

These traits have made Cavanaugh not only a formidable investigator but also a skilled hostage negotiator. Cavanaugh's negotiation strategy is simple. "I like to sloooow things down," he drawls. In 1993, Cavanaugh negotiated a crucial

cease-fire with Branch Davidian leader David Koresh after the bloody shootout that marked the beginning of the siege at the Davidian compound near Waco, Texas. He won the release of 21 Davidians, including 18 children, and helped extract wounded comrades. "Every single person who got out alive," says Pasco, "got out thanks to Jim Cavanaugh." Cavanaugh says he just treated Koresh with respect. "He was very distrustful," says Cavanaugh. "Working with him, it was small baby steps."

**High wire.** An ardent student of leadership theory, and a lover of history, Cavanaugh applies to any new probe a quote from his hero, Winston Churchill: "There is a precipice on either side of you—a precipice of caution and a precipice of over daring." Colleagues say his ability to walk that narrow line made a huge difference in the 2002 sniper investigation, when Cavanaugh was able to surmount numer-

ous turf wars in that multijurisdictional probe and made some bold decisions that helped nab the killers. Through it all, Cavanaugh, 53, remains self-effacing. "I really don't have anything else that I *know* how to do," Cavanaugh told *U.S. News*.

The son of a firefighter, Cavanaugh began his law enforcement career in 1974 as a deputy sheriff in Pasco County, Fla. He was hooked for life his first day when, hours before he was to report for duty, Cavanaugh heard the wail of sirens. "And there's all these officers

ducking behind their cop cars with their guns out," he recalls. "I pull my badge out and say, 'Hey, I'm the new guy; what's happening?'" A man was holding a knife to his girlfriend's throat. "I said, 'Man, I've got to get my uniform on,'" says Cavanaugh, chuckling. "I didn't even get started, and they were taking hostages." In 1976, Cavanaugh joined the ATF. "I like the ATF," he says, "because it's blood and guts law enforcement."

He's seen his share of both. But Cavanaugh's urgent task now is to prevent more church fires. He's been driving from church to church, talking to pastors, congregants, and witnesses, to get a handle on the suspects, believed to be two white males driving a dark SUV. "I want to shape the battlefield," Cavanaugh says. Don't bet against him. ●