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Return of the Weathermen

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The unhappy afterlife of '60s radicalism

By James Miller, 10/19/2003

THIRTY-FOUR YEARS AGO this fall, a small band of well-educated young Americans hell-bent on storming heaven steeled themselves to commit an act of spectacularly gratuitous violence. A militant breakaway faction of Students for a Democratic Society, they called themselves the Weathermen. Their strategy, such as it was, blended theatrical bravado with puritanical zeal – Bonnie and Clyde meet John Brown. Wearing crash helmets and wielding baseball bats, ululating like the revolutionaries they had studied on screen in "The Battle of Algiers," they would run wild in the streets of Chicago, lashing out at any available symbol of privilege and power: police, parked cars, affluent bystanders.

Now, more than a generation later, the Weathermen are back in the news. This summer, a new documentary, "The Weather Underground," directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel, brought the group's story into movie theaters. In September, one of the group's most famous members, Kathy Boudin, was released on parole from the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in upstate New York, where she had spent more than two decades after pleading guilty to a felony charge connected to a murder in the robbery of a Brink's truck in 1981. Boudin's release has in turn prompted the early release of Susan Braudy's book "Family Circle: The Boudins and the Aristocracy of the Left" (Knopf).

Braudy, a former classmate of Boudin's at Bryn Mawr College, argues that Boudin's violent acts were part of a ploy to get her father's attention. But the book's own evidence suggests no such Oedipal melodrama. Instead, we catch a glimpse of an intelligent young woman blindly driven into tragic violence by overpowering moral hubris. Though it contains some new information gleaned from access to Boudin's mother, Jean Boudin, and her private papers, Braudy's study has more in common with tabloid journalism than serious history. (Caveat lector: Michael Boudin, chief judge of the US Court of Appeals for the First Circuit in Boston and Kathy's older brother, is a personal friend.)

The Weathermen's 1969 melee in Chicago, billed "The Days of Rage," was meant to inspire working-class youth to commit similarly gratuitous acts, and to prove the group's revolutionary macho to the Black Panthers. But the Panthers spurned them, and there was no evidence that working-class youth were ready to run wild in the streets. So the group changed its tactics, with deadly results. Early in 1970, a group of Weathermen inadvertently blew up three of their members along with a townhouse on Eleventh Street in New York's Greenwich Village. The group was trying to build an anti-personnel bomb, in order to give Americans a taste of the kind of cruel weaponry their government was using in Vietnam.

Now the object of a national manhunt, and rechristened the Weather Underground, the fugitives – several dozen militants in a handful of American cities – established guerilla "focos," secret cells in which members learned how to build bigger and better bombs, to be detonated in acts of "strategic sabotage." Besides issuing a stream of turgid communiqués denouncing racism and sexism and proclaiming sympathy for fellow revolutionaries such as Ho Chi Minh, the group succeeded in bombing several symbolic targets, including the Pentagon and the Capitol building. Though the group issued warnings to evacuate their targets, inevitably some bystanders were injured. Against all odds, the most notorious Weathermen – Bernadine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, Mark Rudd, Kathy Boudin – all managed to elude the FBI.

After the end of the war in Vietnam in 1975, the group quickly fell apart as key members started turning themselves in. First came Rudd in 1977. Two years later, it was Ayers and Dohrn, who were married and raising two children. And in 1981, Kathy Boudin was finally caught in the botched Brink's robbery. Though the Weathermen's organization had killed no one but themselves, other groups inspired by their brand of violent radicalism killed and wounded a not insignificant number of innocent people.

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Should we – can we – forgive them the wrongs that they committed? For that matter, was what the Weathermen did, under the circumstances of the time, really so wrong?

Take the case of Kathy Boudin, who kept the faith longer than most of her comrades, perhaps because she grew up in a family steeped in the traditions of the left. Raised to cherish social and racial justice, Boudin in high school crusaded against "conspicuous consumption" and "vanity." At Bryn Mawr, she joined the nascent New Left and became a community organizer in Chester, Pa., and Cleveland. Though she started out as a pacifist, by 1969 she had created a cadre of Weathermen followers code-named "Fork," in perverse homage to cult killer Charles Manson, one of whose followers had shoved a fork into the stomach of one of the Family's murder victims.

In 1970, after escaping alive – barely – from the Greenwich Village bomb factory on Eleventh Street, Boudin went underground. When Weathermen dispersed, she joined the grandly named "Black Liberation Army," a tiny group of thugs and radicals that included Mutulu "Doc" Shakur (stepfather of rapper Tupac Shakur), which helped to plan prison escapes and bank robberies, including the ill-fated Brinks robbery that led to her arrest in 1981. "Being underground isn't about being happy," she explained. "It's about doing what you feel is right."

At Bedford Hills, Boudin became a model inmate, helping to train a group of other prisoners to become AIDS counselors. Her time behind bars also led her to reexamine her conceptions of right and wrong – but in a curiously elliptical way. In a letter she wrote to supporters in 2001, Boudin expressed remorse for her part in the Brink's robbery and confessed that she was "seriously out of touch." Yet parts of this letter have a disquieting resemblance to the sort of rote self-criticism that Mao championed during China's Cultural Revolution: "I can see that a combination of my personal issues, wrong thinking, and the impact of years of isolation contributed to my moral failures." There is no mention of how her earlier embrace of revolutionary violence had forced her into "years of isolation."

The views of other veterans of the Weatherman movement run the gamut. In the new film, Mark Rudd, the leader of the Columbia student revolt in 1968, expresses genuine sorrow. More characteristic is Bill Ayers, currently a professor of education, who is defiantly unapologetic, both on camera and in the pages of his 2001 memoir "Fugitive Days." "I don't regret setting bombs," he told *The New York Times* in a profile published, unfortunately, on Sept. 11, 2001. "In fact, I don't think we did enough."

The question of guilt clearly irks Ayers – but it was, and remains, central to the Weatherman phenomenon. For all the neo-Marxist gibberish that larded its communiques, it was a radical movement with Puritan overtones, forged self-consciously out of revulsion at a shameful "white skin privilege" its members hoped to expunge, in part by making a sacrificial offering of their own pure souls.

Moreover, it was only because the group spoke to the manifest guilt of a larger constituency that it had any influence at all. For young radicals uncertain of their own courage, the prospect of putting one's convictions to the test was an unnerving challenge. However mad some of their actions seemed, the Weathermen themselves in the fall of 1969 appeared to embody the fearlessness of real revolutionaries.

But as more of the group's bombs exploded, the Weathermen squandered their claim to moral authority. Hence the pathos of those who survive. In one startling passage near the end of his memoir, Ayers compares his Weather comrades to the American soldiers who cut short the massacre committed by their fellow troops at My Lai in 1968. "It took more than 25 years to imagine their actions as heroic, to remember something moral in doing the unthinkable right thing in war, even when it seemed like the wrong thing. How much longer for the three who died on Eleventh Street?"

Especially in the wake of 9/11, the question seems preposterous, if not obscene. Yet as Ayers well knows, America does have terrorists who have been turned into moral icons. While five people were killed in the Pottawatomie Massacre of 1856 as part of John Brown's armed struggle to abolish slavery, most of us have hymned his virtues, if only half-consciously: "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in his grave, but his truth goes marching on."

In the years to come, will the violence of the Weathermen be regarded with similar forbearance?

I think not. Although they imagined themselves paragons of political courage, the Weathermen were too

divorced from political reality to have an impact even remotely analogous to John Brown's.

Moreover, many of the Weathermen today seem small, self-absorbed, stunningly complacent. It is hard to say which is more dispiriting: Kathy Boudin's wooden self-criticism or Bill Ayers' imperturbable self-regard. It is as if self-examination had devolved into a form of self-righteous narcissism, and the Puritan strand in American radicalism had become a farcical parody of itself. And without a modicum of saving self-knowledge, the self-sacrifice of these men and women now seems as pointless as the violence and suffering that they deliberately inflicted on others.

James Miller, professor of political science at the New School for Social Research and editor of the journal Daedalus, is the author of "Democracy is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago" (1987), among other books.

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