

I was a terrorist.

Where did it come from, the hatred that led pampered Americans to want to bring down the system in the 1960s?

By Jonathan Lerner

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I didn't grow up hungry, seething with inherited hurt in some refugee camp or ghetto -- but well-fed in Chevy Chase, in a big loving family, in a house full of books. My grandparents were struggling immigrants, but my parents were solidly middle-class, and when I approached adulthood in the mid-'60s, all the richness of this country was there for me. I could have been anything.

Like many children of affluence, I was horrified by racism and poverty, and filled with idealism. The impulse was simple and honorable: Everybody should have opportunities like mine. I



became an activist in the civil rights movement, and renewed my desire to perfect the world in response to Vietnam. Yet by the end of that decade I had become warped enough to help found the Weathermen, a cult of leftist cynicism and violence. We were contemptuous of others, convinced we had the answers, and willing to impose them through violence. In other words, we were political terrorists.

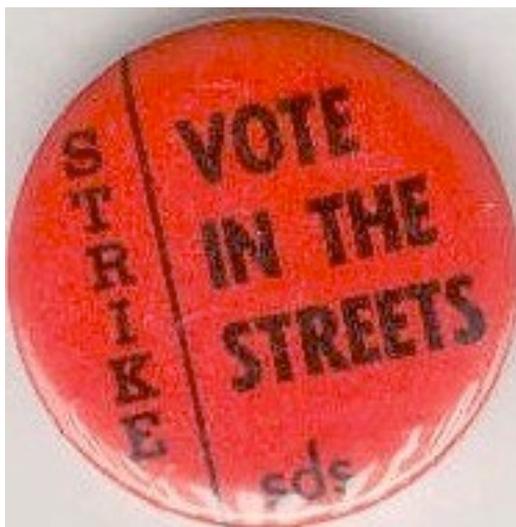
That's not where I thought I was heading. I started out wanting to humanize the world, but ended up perverting my own best instincts and dreams. I lied. I stole. I put innocent people in danger. The only bombs I ever personally built were duds, though there were capable technicians in the group. Among the terrorists of history, however, we must rank low in havoc wreaked. Our bombs were low-power, left in restrooms mostly, at places like the Pentagon, police stations, corporate offices. Security was lax then.

We didn't pretend to do real damage with those little devices. It was victory to elude capture, to reveal the vulnerabilities of the institutions we held responsible for war, poverty in the Third World, inequalities at home. Our real weapon was youthful swagger, which is cheap and thrilling to use, and magnifies well through the media. We gloried in our violence, and glorified it, and in so doing, we helped to create the atmosphere in which, to some inhabitants of the planet, terrorism now seems like right action.

Take two snapshots of my past and lay them side by side. The first, one of my most magical early memories, is from a children's concert, in the Hall of the Americas at the Organization of American States -- a part of the Pax Americana I would later hope to destroy. I was invited forward that day to pluck the strings of a harp. I can close my eyes right now and feel that golden sound go through me. I was a sweet little boy. But I was not a nice young man.

The second snapshot is from one of the last public events at which the Weathermen appeared -- the Vietnam Moratorium of November 1969, when half a million people came to Washington for a protest intended to be peaceful. As its centerpiece event, more than 40,000 people walked single-file from Arlington National Cemetery to the White House. Each carried a candle and a placard with the name of an American who had died in the war. "Many come from places like Oakland University in Rochester, Mich.," an observer wrote, in *Life* magazine, "where they tell me they have never marched and do not belong to any political organization. Among them are older couples who occasionally ask for a particular name. The monitors hand them the card swiftly, without asking the relationship."

I stood in Lafayette Square with my comrades and heckled these people for their earnest longing for peace. Then we Weathermen stomped off to an unofficial event, an attempt to trash the embassy of the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government. The cops wouldn't let us near it, but we weren't picky: Any damage would satisfy. I pulled a length of pipe from my pocket as we ran, and smashed the windshield of a parked Oldsmobile. Like the call-and-response chant of a civil rights picket line, it was answered up and down the block by shattering glass.



Earlier that day, I had gone with several Weathermen to the office of the Moratorium's organizers. We presented ourselves there -- as described in *Life*, "flat and grim in their shades and work clothes and heavy boots" -- to extort money. We dangled, for barter, the intimation that we might refrain from picking a fight with the police, and mentioned the figure \$40,000. The Moratorium leaders didn't give us any money, but we wouldn't have cooled it if they had. By then we did not want conciliation, at any price.

The Weathermen emerged in 1969 from a far more benign and idealistic leftist grass-roots movement, Students for a Democratic Society. Our faction's name was from a line of Bob Dylan's, appropriated as the

title for a position paper, "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." To us, the wind was blowing only where we pointed -- meaning, in printable terms, "See things our way, or you're full of it."

An earlier SDS slogan had been "Let the People Decide." Toward the end of that organization's life, some of us reserved the deciding for ourselves. "How many SDS elections did you rig?" a former Weatherman asked me, years later. I stole only one, but it was a crucial vote that made possible the Weathermen's takeover and evisceration of SDS. Along with two other SDS organizers who later, like me, were near the center of the Weathermen, I stuffed offending ballots into a brown grocery bag, and then dropped it in the trash.

Where did I get this cynicism about political process, this lack of scruple, this delight in the sound of breaking glass? Certainly not at home.

My parents were liberals, not radicals. Their boldest political gesture was attending the Lincoln Memorial concert by Marian Anderson when the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to let the African American singer perform in Constitution Hall. I was respectfully aware that many in my grandparents' and parents' generations had been labor activists and communists. But among my own relatives only Great-Aunt Bessie had been involved at all, and we made fun of her because she insisted into old age that the FBI was watching her.

My siblings demonstrated against racism and the war; they participated in the era's cultural upheavals. But they were never hellbent on violence and breaking the law, as I became. Instead, they went on to engaged, unconventional careers: a modern dancer who became a psychologist, a psychologist who makes films and writes songs, an acupuncturist who leads a jazz band. Whatever separated me from them, it wasn't in our family background.

My first political act, in 1961 when I was 13, was to join a picket line to integrate the McLean Gardens apartments in Northwest D.C. I went by myself that day. But I was inspired by some kids I knew from school who had already been to civil rights events. I was drawn to the cause -- and to them, because they espoused it, and because they were smart and cool and I wanted to be one of them.

Over the next years, we collected canned food for black people in Mississippi who were boycotting white-owned businesses; we often skipped school to picket the White House. It felt good to be part of this thing for which some people were risking their lives, even if for us it was all fun. It felt wonderful to be part of a tight circle that was welcomed into an enormous movement where people referred to each other as sister and brother and marched to updated spirituals. It was spiritual. It was about connection, about healing the world.

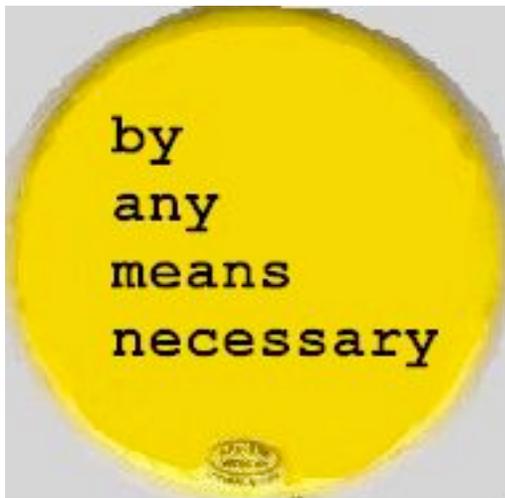
I went off to college, at Antioch in Ohio. There was an SDS chapter, but I never attended the meetings. SDS was then emerging from obscurity, thanks to the expansion of the war and the voracious draft, which put so many male students at risk; eventually it would boast hundreds of campus chapters, a network of regional offices, thousands of paid members, and hundreds of thousands who responded to its calls and rallied against the war. I would join demonstrations, add my passionate voice to the chanting. But I wasn't -- then or ever -- much interested in

theoretical or strategic debates, which dominated SDS meetings. I was into art; the actions I liked best involved image and media, and in those days were called guerrilla theater.

But Jeff Jones, my best friend, was a big radical on campus. That's not all we didn't have in common. He was a sunny, blond surfer from L.A. who'd been a counselor at YMCA camp, while I was an emotionally mixed-up, culturally pretentious East Coast bohemian wannabe. Antioch was small and familial, with no hard separation between the politicians like Jeff and the artists like me. How did we meet? Passing a joint in somebody's dorm room, maybe, or kibitzing on the student union steps. We responded to each other's cleverness, savored the ways we were exotic to each other.

In 1967, after two years at Antioch, Jeff and I both decided -- independently -- to drop out and move to New York. I did it to get involved in professional theater. He did it to join the regional staff of SDS. There was a community of Antiochians in New York -- there on student co-op work

assignments, or, like the two of us, having left school. It was like a branch of the sweet academic village where we'd all met, grafted onto the big city. Jeff and I ran into each other in New York, and made a point of staying in touch.



With a group of those transplanted Antiochians, I once tried an ambitious guerrilla theater. One of these friends had a film studio in a building facing Times Square. From its roof, on New Year's Eve, when millions of people would be in front of their televisions watching the ball drop, we would crash a radio-controlled toy airplane right into the ball, and then release a statement to the press decrying U.S. bombing of North Vietnam.

Those toy planes, with their gasoline engines, look real -- not like jetliners, but like the single-engine craft an antiwar kamikaze might have commandeered then. At a time when people were starving themselves, even immolating themselves, to protest the war, a kamikaze-style attack wouldn't have been so far-fetched. We loved the idea of TV screens filled with the image of a crashing airplane; now of course I get an extra chill from this scenario.

None of us had ever been close to the mechanism of the dropping ball. We paused for a brief discussion of what might happen. Was there a ledge to catch any falling, possibly flaming, debris? Or would the whole rig just tumble into the crowded street? What about the people watching from across the country? Mass panic? If anyone got hurt, we shortly concluded, it would just be their tough luck: Innocent people were dying every day in Vietnam, so why not at home? In the end, we couldn't get the little engine to start in the cold, so we'll never know.

By the way, none of the other participants in this unstaged drama joined the Weathermen. They became, variously, a filmmaker, a muralist, a critic, the founder of a feminist press -- all using their radical sensibilities to touch people. As far as I know, none of them ever again did anything

that could have hurt anybody. I wish I could say those things about myself -- or that I never had another such glib discussion about the possibility of injuring innocent people.

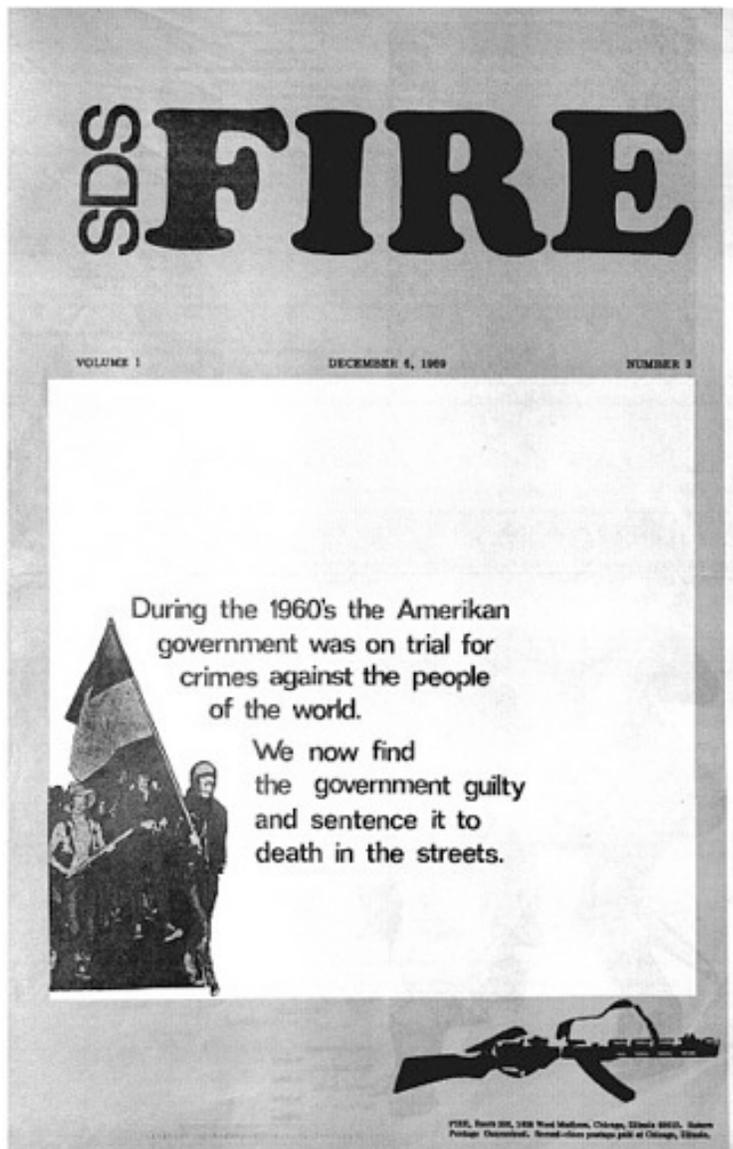
I had gone to New York for love of art, but images of insurrection were everywhere. Race riots broke over America's cities, in those summers, as surely as bad storms. Newark, across the Hudson, went up, and I went with Jeff to an angry rally condemning the police response. The New York Review of Books ran an account of the Newark battle. The magazine's cover showed a schematic drawing of a gasoline bomb; this picture blazed for a fortnight from news kiosks all over the city. With a group of Jeff's SDS comrades, I watched the film "The Battle of Algiers," about the successful urban guerrilla war against the French: unannounced bombs in coffee bars, weapons hidden beneath chadors, French officers confounded by a diagram of the decentralized rebel organization -- as spread out, invisible and hard to dig up as the roots of an invasive tree. We left the theater breathless, giddy, inspired.

Against all this, the theater and dance workshops I was doing seemed pitiful and unconnected. Also, I felt lonely -- and scared, as should any 19-year-old attempting to break into theater who lacks dramatic talent and emotional armor. But within a few months, I was asked to join the SDS staff. Jeff's friends wanted me to start guerrilla theater groups in the campus chapters. And Jeff said he needed me: We would work together, get an apartment together. I felt close to these people, welcomed by them. And I was impossibly in love with Jeff -- although I was only murkily aware of it at the time.

Is this too sketchy a motivation? Add this dark pencil stroke: My mother died of cancer when I was 16 and a senior in high school. My family fell apart for a while then. I was smart, worldly and bristling with touch-me-not attitude. But I really needed direction and supervision -- hardly forthcoming at Antioch in those days -- and a firm embrace. I needed my mom. I was in worse shape than I knew. But to be an SDS staffer was to seem powerful, pulled together. By joining, in a single step I got a job description (theater director, office manager), a stance toward the world (as a member of an international radical movement), a place in a community that valued me (for my competence and jokes), and time with my best friend (but never enough of that). I felt the politics, and didn't disagree. Still, I joined SDS then, and the Weathermen later, mostly for psychological, not ideological, reasons.

This is how it is in organizations that have the characteristics of cults, and maybe in any group of activists. You get a role that fills some hole in you. The hijacker Mohammed Atta, like me, came from a middle-class family and received a good education. He also happened to have, it was reported by the New York Times, an overbearing father who derided him for being timid and girlish and challenged him to be as successful as his older sisters, a professor and a physician. I don't doubt the fierceness of Atta's Islamic passion. But perhaps he also had something to say to his dad.

In my experience, the glue that bound groups together was not so much ideology as a collective identity based on feeling different -- superior, that is -- continually reinforced by our state of escalating battle. At the center of SDS when I joined, we saw ourselves as part of the enormous youth culture and student movements; but as more serious, because we were trying to lead; more committed, because we were doing it full time, on "subsistence" salaries of \$15 a week; and braver, because we could get into trouble.



So we felt cooler than the rest of our generation: that our parties were more intense, our sexual and communal-living experiments more liberated and meaningful. We felt ourselves to be more heroic and inventive, closer to people like Che Guevara and Simone de Beauvoir than to your average peacenik or hippie.

We were still driven by political realities -- racism at home, apartheid in Africa, police states in Latin America, and that relentless war being waged in our name. But we became increasingly frustrated, enraged, embittered. We felt torn between our roots in the nonviolent civil rights movement, and our desperation to do something -- almost anything -- powerful. Fighting internally over strategy, by 1969 SDS was whirling apart.

This was provoked in part, it must be said, by the dirty tricks of the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign. These included classics like planting agents in our midst to cause dissension and spread rumors, and more inventive tactics like distributing a pornographic comic book depicting

recognizable SDS and black-power leaders having sex and absconding with their organizations' treasuries. I once opened a letter that accused one of our regional organizers of being a secret agent. It was written in a jeering tone, and humiliatingly quoted another line of Bob Dylan's: "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is." The organizer it named was someone I knew a bit, and liked, and whom I had considered brave and reliable. Of course I assumed that the letter was an instance of FBI disinformation. But I couldn't help myself: I made sure to never have a substantive conversation with him again, and struck him from the mental list of people I would ever trust. It works as simply as that.

When I joined SDS, its inner circle was like a family. But later the Weathermen was more of a cult, especially in its formative period -- the second half of 1969. Paranoia plus egotism plus a worldview that obliterated all subtlety combined to create an atmosphere that was insane.

You had to parrot the party line. Woe unto you if you uttered some political formulation that sounded too much like what a rival faction -- whose members might have been close friends a few months back -- could have said; or if you had hesitated during that day's confrontation with the cops. You could be subjected to a "criticism/self-criticism" session, in which you were expected to abase yourself and recant, and to then "fight for yourself" and show reconstructed thought. Weatherman ideology, distilled to its simplistic essence, was this: that racism was the organizing principle of American history; that the United States was a thieving imperialist power; that the solution was revolution; and that the way to bring it about was to support black liberation at home and national liberation abroad. There were plenty of other people with such ideas. Some founded tenant unions and radio stations and legal defense teams. Some went on to analyze burning questions like those of natural resources, new technologies or sexual politics, all issues that the Weathermen -- male-identified, and seeing through 19th-century Marxian lenses -- addressed only reluctantly and smugly. We weren't even the only radicals who supported the idea of clandestine, armed action. But we were among the few who felt compelled, for reasons originating deep within our individual selves, to actually try it right this minute. We took this step because we had already placed ourselves on a self-propelling spiral of confrontation, never stepping off long enough to notice any other possible paths.

In June 1969, a final rigged election delivered SDS into the hands of the Weathermen. The prize was the national machinery -- nothing fancy, just an office on a seedy Chicago block, with phone lines, a print shop and a membership list; plus intangibles like reputation and reach: SDS was the most visible organization on the American left, with contacts at nearly every campus and in movements around the world. But our goal of a revolutionary militia was the antithesis of big, unwieldy SDS. We quickly squandered all the resources, alienated everybody remotely close, and let SDS collapse.

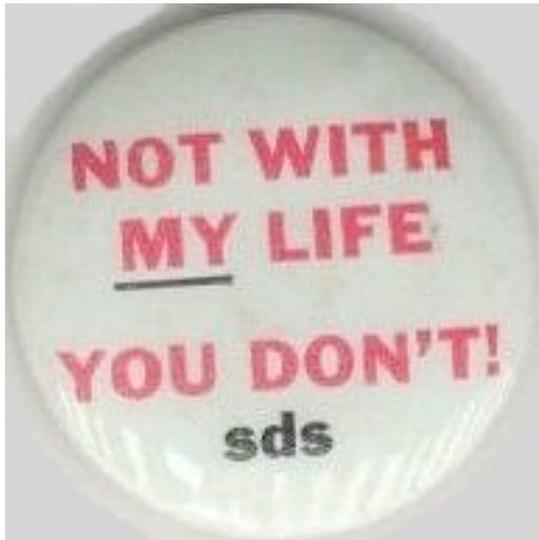
The following spring, when the United States invaded Cambodia and student protesters were killed at Jackson State in Mississippi and Kent State in Ohio, there were spontaneous strikes and reactions at hundreds of colleges and communities. But by then, SDS was dead. That awful war in Indochina dragged on for another five bloody years, in part because domestic opposition was in disarray. We Weathermen did many reprehensible things, but together they amount to very little next to the thousands of American and Indochinese lives lost and ruined between 1970 and 1975. A strong, focused student movement might have helped end the war sooner. Destroying SDS was our worst, most selfish act.

Instead of building that movement, we spent the second half of 1969 exhorting ourselves to "chaosify Amerikkka," contemplating "revolutionary suicide," proclaiming our willingness to "go out in a blaze of glory." Just like a cult, we spoke this rhetoric of apocalypse. The only element of the typical cult we lacked was the single charismatic leader; our '60s-style innovation was to have a whole group of them. These were mostly people who, like Jeff, possessed a combination of good looks, glib speech and daring posture that the rest of us found irresistible; I wasn't the only person who fell in love with them, one way or another. Still, fewer than 200 people (at a time when SDS had more than 20,000 paid members) chose to join the Weathermen, forming 24-hour living and working groups -- we called them collectives, but now they might be called cells -- in fewer than a dozen cities.

Our new conviction was that white college students -- which we ourselves had been so recently -- were irremediably racist, and too soft and spoiled to be revolutionaries. Plenty of affluent white Americans -- radical or not, then and now -- have felt guilt over class and race. It's an understandable, if essentially useless, emotion. But we took our own bleak vision of white people to heart, transforming our guilt into self-hatred.

We made an exception for working-class white street kids. We considered them sufficiently oppressed and alienated to have revolutionary potential. Also -- a big plus -- we figured they knew how to fight. So our Weather collectives would mount actions designed to attract them by showing that we were heavies, too: planting a Viet Cong flag at a beach, and then defending it; running through city high schools shouting, "Jailbreak!"

We did usually end up in fights -- with the people we were hoping to attract, or the police; we didn't convert anybody. Because I worked in the office, and was supposed to keep things there running, I never got any licks in, myself. At our biggest action, the Days of Rage in Chicago in 1969, I stood watching from the shadows as the group gathered, and followed for a few blocks until the trashing started. That's when I turned back, so I would be sure not to get busted. I was scared of fighting, so I didn't mind being excused; but it added another little twist of guilt.



Our cultivated self-hatred fueled these provocative actions, and it fueled the exhausting way we lived. Nobody had his own room. A collective house would have little furniture, just a few mattresses on the floor; you slept where you fell. For something to wear, as one ex-comrade recalls, you picked through the communal pile to distinguish between "the clean dirties and the dirty dirties." Money, cars -- pretty much anything you brought with you -- was collectivized. We lived on peanut butter and jelly. Sleep and privacy were in short supply.

Even sex was collectivized. Those with power routinely commandeered the bodies of those whom they desired. On a number of occasions there were group sexual encounters of 10, 20, 30 people. We called these orgies, but the term implies something more pleasurable and less forced than what I recall -- even though I was one of those who instigated them. We passed around crab lice, gonorrhea, pelvic inflammatory disease.

What is called to mind by this voluntary state of collective delusion, deprivation and confrontation? Waco? Jonestown? Heaven's Gate? Unlike some cults, the organization didn't instruct us to break ties to our families, so much as to see what we could extract from them. But nobody maintained normal contact. How could you breezily chat with your folks when you were busy torching their hopes for you? My sister passed through Chicago and tried to see me; nobody at the office would tell her where I was that day -- off in the country, learning to shoot an M-1 carbine. Surely she would have been shocked; my family only knew me as a gentle kid. "We always thought you were just handling the money," my stepmother says now. Once I wrote to my

mother's brother with some bogus story, trying to guilt-trip him into sending me a check. He replied that he would support me if I would return to school, but not now. "I am," he wrote, "part of the establishment you are trying to destroy." I circled this in red and taped the letter to my office door, a flag of my eagerness to cut myself off at the roots.

Here is an exquisite recipe for slavishness: You see yourself having given everything for the group -- but you never know how long the group will deign to keep you. Individuals' standings were always shifting. People were frequently reassigned from one location to another. Rank-and-file members rose into and then were busted from positions of intermediate leadership -- unpredictably, at the word of central committee members. Leading a criticism of somebody, or having sex with one of the male leaders if you were female, could enhance your position. If you were offed from the group, no one would trust you again -- or even talk to you. Sometimes members of the central committee were offed, though the rest of us never knew quite why.

As people accumulated felony charges -- for assault and mob action -- and faced jail, the planning began in earnest for going underground. It was clear that not everyone would go; we underlings waited in excruciating tension, wondering who would get "the tap on the shoulder" that meant elevation to the heroic status of guerrilla.

Because I was working in the office, handling the money -- secretly skimming a bit for the occasional greasy spoon breakfast -- and enjoying the protection of several top leaders who were friends, my circumstances were less brutal. I had a prestigious position, and more freedom than most members, with nobody bossing me around -- and a staff, in fact, to whom I gave orders. Writing leaflets, designing posters, giving press conferences, I got to glorify violence through imagery and words without having to actually fight; anyway, I was supposed to stay away from the battles and raise bail money. Plainclothes cops would follow when I went to the bank or the printer, but I was never snatched and beaten up by them, as some others were. And I came through that period without acquiring felony charges.

But I didn't escape the sting of our internal culture. It finally dawned on people that I'd never been the subject of a criticism session. So, on a date when people from other city collectives were in Chicago for a mass court appearance, one was called. It commenced late in the evening, with me on a stool in the middle of a big circle. In my nightmarish recollection, I have blocked out the specific accusations. Probably they had to do with my never having proved myself in a street fight with the cops. And given how we all glorified battle, I was indeed racked with just such self-doubt. All I do remember is clamming up under the barrage of criticism, and wondering who all these people were. But I knew my best friend Jeff never uttered a peep in my defense. By dawn -- I noticed with a sinking sense of betrayal -- he had dozed off in his chair.

Soon after, in February 1970, I was sent with a group of Weathermen on a propaganda trip of U.S. radicals to cut sugar cane in Cuba. After lunch one day, while I was sharpening my machete, a friend came running to tell me that a newscast somebody had picked up from Miami on a transistor radio said a town house on West 11th Street in New York had blown up, killing several people. In an instant I grasped what had occurred. One of our comrades' fathers owned a house on that street; I'd visited her there. Her collective must have been using the place as a bomb factory, and slipped up. A few weeks later, the Cuban authorities gave us copies of American newsweeklies that confirmed this, and passed along a verbal message from our leadership --

conveyed, I have always assumed, through the Cuban representative at the United Nations -- telling us not to return. From those magazines, we also learned that the Weathermen had vanished underground. So with three others, I went to Europe. Our plan was to find false ID, make our way back to the States without being noticed, and then reconnect with the fugitive organization. We accomplished the first two parts, but not the third. For nearly a year, until a purely accidental encounter with a Weatherman comrade in a New York subway car, we four were "lost."

The three who blew themselves up had climbed to the reckless pinnacle of Weatherman terrorism: They had, evidently, been making a bomb filled with nails, for an ROTC dance. Their deaths forced a period of reflection, and by the time we four reconnected in New York, the organization had calmed down. It was known now as the Weather Underground. Future bombings would have only symbolic, not human, targets; guns would not be used. This had been agreed to by everyone still a member; people deemed responsible for what had gone wrong, or seen as unremorseful, had been kicked out. And indeed, no one else was ever again physically injured by a Weather Underground bomb.

The internal culture had changed, too. The madness had become hippie mellowness. Gone were the thuggish street-fighting stance, the leather jackets, lengths of chain and steel-toed boots. In their place were moccasins, love beads and long hair -- dyed, of course, for disguise. Jeff and his pals on the central committee had a sweet floppy dog now, and a vintage pickup truck. They looked like any stoned freaks en route to a commune. Youth culture was protective coloration for the fugitives.

This was fine with me. I'd never felt comfortable trying to match the violent revolutionary archetype, despite my facility with the rhetoric. Now I looked forward to a more romantic, less scary organizational life -- conducted around campfires in the countryside, maybe, rather than under bare bulbs in city basements.

Maintaining people underground was hard. Facing no charges, I was told to live openly. Until the Weather Underground imploded in 1976, I remained a member. I was publicly active all that time, too, in antiwar activities and later in support of the militant Native American movement. I had continual contact with the fugitive friends I loved and idealized -- but never enough to make me happy. I was frequently watched by the police. So meeting my comrades required cover stories, disguises and elaborately confusing itineraries.

To spend a week with them, for instance, which I did a number of times, I might tell people I was going camping -- off the grid with some fictitious high school friend. Then I would leave my apartment, take a bus and then another to the house of a publicly unconnected supporter. There I would pick up my fake ID, put on a hat and false glasses. Then I would take a taxi to the train station, a train to a nearby city, and from there an airplane to the city where my underground friends were waiting.

Still, I lived with the constant fear that I might accidentally blow my friends' cover. And I felt guilty over the extra sacrifices of their lives underground, and self-loathing for not being fully that which we revered, a guerrilla. So as long as I chose to stay with the organization, I remained weak, effaced and mildly but continually put down -- by myself as much as the group. The

subtext of my own story was desire for an intimacy and belonging that was always just out of reach, never fully attainable. Other people had their own peculiar motivations. But for every member of the Weather Underground, there was something going on besides the politics, something to get or prove.

As the movement that began in the '60s was petering out, for the Weather Underground self-perpetuation became the point. The same leaders stayed in place the whole time. The members were decentralized, so that even those of us who had known one another for years could be kept out of contact. Occasional squeaks of dissent were easily muted. Venally, the leaders lived better -- in bigger houses, driving cars instead of using public transport. They held their secret meetings with the richer, more glamorous supporters in nice restaurants, while lesser fugitives met their contacts at Burger King. And as usually happens to groups based on corruption, deceit and unexamined loyalties, the organization eventually tore itself apart.

As the Vietnam War ended in 1975, taking the antiwar movement with it, our leaders hatched a classic Marxist-Leninist plot. Using secretly directed activists like me, the Weather Underground would start a "public" front organization. But the unaffiliated participants we gathered in turned out to be less stupid than this transparent scheme required, and soon angrily realized the thing was being controlled from someplace they couldn't quite see. They weren't smart enough to walk away, though. Instead -- in the grim communist tradition -- they instigated a "rectification campaign" of accusation, recrimination and surreal miniature show trials, to determine just who among us had sold out the revolution most. And the Weather Underground quickly splintered apart. I had objected to this "front organization" plan, but as usual allowed myself to be told what to do. Now I felt bitter at everybody involved for our grandiosity and games. And at myself for caving in, and letting my emotions and personal loyalties be manipulated. I had one last, sour meeting with Jeff, in a Chinese restaurant, and got from him neither explanation nor apology. His mellifluous tongue was thick and dumb now: He could not explain his role, nor would he acknowledge how our friendship had been used. Suddenly it felt easy to walk away.

A few people retained their zeal for revolutionary violence and later did things to land themselves in jail, where some still reside. For most of the Weathermen, like Jeff and me, the legal consequences were negligible. We came to in a daze. We crawled off to lick our wounds, learn to be responsible grown-ups -- hard work, for the inexperienced -- and come to terms with what we had done.

It has taken me until now -- 25 years -- to fully realize how foolish and wrong we were, and to be able to say these things out loud. I had to wait for my father to die, so I wouldn't break his heart. I try not to gratuitously hurt people anymore. And I had to know for sure that the life I have made is good for me, and good for the world, and all mine. I still have my political sensitivities, to things like racism and the dangerously worsening disparity between the rich and poor of the world. But I do not need to be the one who changes it all. It feels strange to find myself supporting our country's current war. I certainly have my criticisms, my dismay that it is necessary, my fears of what it will provoke. But I am not confused at all about defending a society resilient enough to have me as a full participant -- after I devoted my youth to tearing it all down.

Postscript, 2004

This essay was written in October, 2001. When, in the last paragraph, I said that I supported "our country's current war," I was not referring to the present disastrous Republican misadventure in Iraq. But I did then and do still believe that any society seeking to function within a culture of enlightenment, democracy and law faces an inescapable war of self-defense against terrorism in general, and anti-Western extremism in particular.