

Antiwar Movements, Then and Now

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Bill Ayers, *Fugitive Days: A Memoir* (Beacon Press, 2001), 292 pp., cloth \$24.00

“It is difficult to communicate at a distance the sense of helplessness and suppressed rage we all felt by the end of 1967,” historian David Schalk recently recalled of the sixties U.S. Antiwar Movement. I certainly would not know. I was not even born then. Yet, if organizing meetings held after September 11 are any indication, the legacy of just this movement looms large. Seattle veterans have started talking about a global peace and justice movement. A recent e-mail even proclaimed, “you don’t have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind is blowing.” And one wonders if it’s time for a pause to consider the story of the underground struggle against the Vietnam war.

Between the recent military escalation, antiwar mobilizations, and the media hailstorm that seems to have crossed the line from grief to panic, the need for a reassessment becomes imperative. As a movement consciously (and sometimes unconsciously) builds on the lessons, contours, and unresolved legacies of antiwar movements past, the need for a more coherent narrative of these years takes on a certain urgency. Weather Underground veteran Bill Ayers’ memoir bears light on a dark, often misunderstood, crucial point within U.S. political history. From the townhouse explosion on New York’s West 11th Street to his own participation in bombing the Pentagon and his life in the underground, *Fugitive Days* offers an unsentimental consideration of the splintering culmination of the U.S. Antiwar Movement. The implications for a generation of social movements are difficult to deny.

Fugitive Days never falls into the trap of condescension which often accompanies literature about the generation of activists who made history during the sixties and seventies. From the get-go, Ayers offers a disclaimer, presumably to keep his colleagues still in prison out of the fray, that *Fugitive Days* is but one person’s memory. There is “a necessary

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incompleteness here, a covering of facts and a blurring of details, which is in part an artifact of those exquisite and terrible times.” Names and places are changed in a story which may not measure up to the standards of historical accuracy, yet represents one person’s “honest” recollection of a difficult period. This search for an authentic voice drives Ayers’ entire narrative.

Searching for a Something Real

Fugitive Days begins with Ayers’ recollections of a privileged 1950s childhood and his difficulties with a sunny, always happy culture apparently incapable of considering its ugly twin brother, the shadowy, structural violence below its surface. While Ayers’ parents came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War, they did not encourage inquiry into this history. “We don’t talk that way,” Ayer’s mother informed him. The past was something to be packaged away from view. The quiet rebellion (or insanity) of a child growing up in the shadows of the Cold War, the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, and oppressive blandness simmered, as it contended with the plastic Mary Tyler Moore ethos of the day. Much of Ayers’ counter-cultural impulse can be read as a rejection of suburban monoculture.

In search of “something darker and more soulful,” Ayers took off first in flights of fancy and then around the world. Beginning with a curiosity which led him to Marx, Ayers embraced James Baldwin, committing himself to be not another “uptight and fucked up white man.” (He viewed Marx as being as reductive as his pie-in-the-sky mother.) His reading of Baldwin’s “Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation” offers the first glimpses of Ayers’ intellectual romance with political violence. Given that there are no block quotes, it is difficult to know where Baldwin ends and Ayers begins. Yet the words “only when the slave is freed, will the cause and the nature of the violence be ended. Then the possibility of peace, of non-violence, and even of equality might become real,” offer what might well look like intellectual justification for armed political struggle. “If you truly oppose the violence of hunger, you might understand guns in the hands of the hungry” (42).

SDS and SNCC

Having tasted righteous indignation, Ayers began a radical journey without clear route or model, leaving the University of Michigan in search of a role in the Civil Rights Movement, and adventure in the merchant marine, yet discovering very little. By 1965 we find Ayers sitting in

a café in Rome reading about a place he knew little about called Vietnam, and then returning to Michigan to join the Antiwar Movement. And coherence emerges. "I was opening my eyes, and by seeing the world I became implicated in its problems. It was 1965 and I was 20 years old." This is the book's first indication of his age or the date, as if time began with the Antiwar Movement (51). And Ayers, no longer the malcontent, but the activist, was born.

In the next chapters, we follow the young activist as he masters Antiwar arguments, contemplates Thoreau and the principles of non-violent civil disobedience, is arrested for blocking the local draft board and spends some ten days in jail without complaint. "Vietnam was becoming for me more than a dot on the map. It was a land with a history and a geography, boundaries and borders like everywhere else." In it, Ayers, like many, would locate "dimensions, like hopes and fears, longings and terrors, the personal, the interpreted. a scribble of psychic scars, a kaleidoscope of crooked footpaths and unbounded horizons." Within these paths, Ayers' colorful prose details the stories of a generation reinventing itself, discovering new vistas both within themselves and in a political arena.

Ayers' organizing is defined as an interplay between the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). While motivated by SNCC's emerging critique of a system which waged war against poor black people at home and the Vietnamese abroad, Ayers found his vehicle in the early SDS. The SDS began as a leftwing student organization of a recognizable type, but the students they sought to organize were undergoing a metamorphosis into something unrecognizable. The challenge SDS posed for their generation was simple: "How will you live your life so that it doesn't make a mockery of your values?" The goal was to create an environmentally friendly, more participatory democracy, devoid of racism. To achieve these goals, the SDS outlined an urban agenda based on community organizing around segregation and economic justice, mobilizing poor people in big Northern cities. The plan was for SDS members to live with the poor, fighting for tenant and welfare rights and against police brutality. Ayers spent the summer involved in the Cleveland Project, worked as an organizer, and became involved in radical education, a calling Ayers maintains to this day. Over the next three years, Ayers worked as director of the Children's Community in Ann Arbor, an education project for preschoolers run out of a church basement, while the U.S. government waged war on two fronts.

"I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I

moved,” Ayers imagines the inner dialogue of Lyndon Baines Johnson. “If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. But if I left the war, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation seen as an appeaser. I would be seen as an unmanly man.” LBJ was a tragic figure, Ayers observed, but “to hell with him,” he concluded, as the full consciousness of the extent of U.S. war crimes began to sink in. But in the meantime the student world, under the influence of the war and of sex and drugs and rock-and-roll, had been transformed. SDS was no longer a talking shop for a few thousand graduate students and ex-graduate students, but was suddenly a mass organization. The college town antiwar affinity groups, where the best of the leadership of the early SDS were to be found, such as that in Ann Arbor around Ayers and his lover Diana Oughton, were now facing a challenge no group of student leaders had ever before faced in the history of the United States. This is the heart of the book, the story of the ways in which they failed and succeeded.

Days of Rage, Loss of Self

And the War went on and on. By late 1967 and 1968, Ayers’ affinity group was contemplating deploying more controversial tactics, including sacrificing some of their principles of nonviolence. Ayers offers a detailed account of the difficult turn away from Gandhian principles. The metaphors of “losing the self” and a slow “descent” take hold as nonviolence is left behind. The shift began with a number of quiet conversations. Why don’t we really bring the war home? Because if you use violence you became what you are fighting, the oppressed become the oppressors. “You know you can catch the very disease you are fighting...you want to stop the war, you become warlike. You want to fight inhumanity, and you become inhumane. It’s a contagion through combat,” Diana Oughton, Ayers longtime lover, advised, ever the voice of reason.

But in the face of the political assassination of Martin Luther King and a still escalating war abroad, the idea of bringing the war home never lost steam. <<may I assume the words preceding “Oughton continued” should be in quotes?>>“The Vietnamese are more interested in us influencing our Republican parents than in us actually engaging in guerilla conflict,” Oughton continued. But Ayers was not interested. Tom Hayden and the better part of the old SDS leadership called for activists to expose the violence of American democracy at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968, and the results were spectacular. The

whole world watched. Nixon was elected, the Vietnam war continued, and the secret domestic war (COINTELPRO) by the U.S. secret police forces, both FBI and CIA, moved into high gear. The tension mounted everywhere, and most of all within that faction of SDS now committed to the project of “bringing the war home.” A year later, Ayers led a rampage through the streets of Chicago during the “Days of Rage,” smashing police cars and being beaten by the police. Ayers paints a picture of himself as an adrenaline junky, “I was on a freedom high, and all I needed to feed my habit was one more bit of action.” Yet, by the time he started losing friends to this pursuit, the jittery buzz became a “high octane combination of panic and pain.” Along the way, his role in the movement shifts from struggling for America’s hearts and minds to being part of a guerrilla war.

While Ayers did not go underground until 1970, in the months before he might as well have. Deep into the evening of the first of the Days of Rage, Ayers wandered through Chicago’s darkness west of the Loop. Though he’d lived in and around Chicago, he’d never encountered quite this geography of Chicago’s underworld. “Are you one of them? One of the revolutionary brothers...One of them—what do you call ’em—Weathermen,” Ayers was greeted by a group of street people and squatters who provided shelter and care for the wounded in the evening’s melee. Twenty-eight policemen had been injured and one hundred protesters arrested. Perhaps the finest part of the book is Ayers’ description of the spiral of forces, political and psychological, that gripped his “bring the war home” SDS faction, now calling itself “Weathermen,” in the fall and winter of 1969–1970. In those crazed months, Ayers divided his time between planting pipe bombs and running from the Chicago police, who had gone on an all-out assault against the Weathermen and the Black Panthers, hanging Weathermen out of windows, jailing and executing Black Panthers. On no less than three occasions Ayers bombed a statue depicting a policeman at the site of the Haymarket Riot. Mayor Daley would repair the statue and Ayers would blow the legs out from under it again, until the statue required a twenty-four hour armed guard.

Ayers does not even attempt to explain the logic of the politics of 1969–1970, acknowledging that their manifesto is almost incomprehensible. But he does draw a picture of the triumph of ideology, the Weatherman waving their “little red books” as the divide grew wider. Gone was the SDS urban agenda of organizing the poor for economic justice; gone was the open minded praxis of the New Left which aimed to test ideas with action, discarding those strategies which failed, while

embracing those which seemed to work. In their place, the clean certitude of ideology untested by action ruled the day. Impossibly heroic military struggle was to be attempted; doubts and second-thoughts had to be suppressed. Ayers describes the descent in painstaking detail, recalling being scolded for the bourgeois indulgence of reading Brecht, as art and laughter were lost to the revolution. At another point, Ayers, emulating the Chinese students in the Cultural Revolution, thanks a critic for attacking and humiliating him during an organizing meeting. "We had to fight liberalism with a revolutionary line, oppose idealistic foolishness and sentimentalism with hard materialist reality." In Ayers' frank narrative, one can trace the steps towards dour humorlessness and self-importance, which would dog left-leaning community organizers and stifle movements for social change for a generation. For Ayers the result was nothing less than the loss of a sense of himself, and a lover. For the Weathermen the result was a tragedy that posed in the most brutal way the question—could they learn from their errors?

Diana Oughton, whom Ayers had known since his days at the Children's Community, was blown up in the February 1970 townhouse explosion on Greenwich Village's West 11th Street, along with Weathermen Terry Robbins and David Gold. And no one really knows what happened. Bombs were being made, and it seems clear that the intended victims were not war criminals but anonymous citizens. Before this crime could be committed, the bombs went off.

To their eternal credit, the Weathermen got the message. From now on their actions were to be "propaganda of the deed," with careful preparation to make sure that no one would be hurt. Ayers and the rest of the Weatherpeople now entered the underground, giving up their birth names for the names of infants who'd died shortly after their birth. As the war continued, so did the Weather bombings, including a well placed pipe bomb in a bathroom in the Pentagon. Given the current context, it's hard to respond to this, except that like many chapters, the story of the bombing reads like a riveting novel. In the time between the My Lai Massacre and September 11, 2001, a bomb in the bathroom of a war facility, with ample warning for those inside to get out so no one is hurt, reads more like reckless advocacy than "terrorism." Ayers' account of life underground (and on the ten-most-wanted list) in the world of the seventies counter-culture is a great story. The war came to an end, so did the seventies, and so did the Weathermen. With the revelation of massive FBI criminal illegalities the prosecution of the Weathermen became impossible. Most surfaced at the end of the seventies and, like Ayers, have since led lives that even the most sectarian of their enemies

would have to admit are in keeping with the social goals of the original SDS.

Killing a Monster

“Our agenda was large enough to fill many lifetimes—we wanted to teach the children, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, fight the power, and end the war. We saw our country as a marauding monster, galloping along leaving behind dead, inert things. We would stop it,” says Ayers. There is the old expression, “Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity.” I wish the Weatherpeople had spent as much time trying to teach the monster and its followers, as they did aiming to stop them. Perhaps they did and the sexy violent parts are the only things we remember, but it sounds like there was still a lot of posturing going on. And unfortunately, Ayers’ monster is alive with a vengeance, still rattling its sabers. And today it’s our problem. History will recall whether we come any closer to success or put as much on the line as the Weather Underground and their movements did. Revolutionaries have to believe there is another route, Ayers explains: “Knowing now that thoughts of Elysian fields can lead to the garrote and the guillotine and the gulag, I still can’t imagine a fully human world without utopian dreams. Why would anyone go on?” *Fugitive Days* is a painful story of activists losing themselves in a cause larger than they understood. As a new generation builds its own movements, the painful lesson I hope we can learn from the experience of the Weathermen is that while personal liberation is not an alternative, it cannot be sacrificed to fighting imperialism, the class struggle, or fighting for global justice, because it is an absolutely necessary complement. Another world is possible—we’re still trying to get there.