



JOHN JACOBS (L) AND TERRY ROBBINS (R) AT THE DAYS OF RAGE, CHICAGO, OCTOBER 1969

DAVID FENTON

You Don't Need a Weatherman

to know which way the wind blows

THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND

(U.S., 2003): Documentary directed by Sam Green and Bill Siegel. Produced by Green, Carrie Lozano, Siegel and Marc Smolowitz. Executive producers, Christian Ettinger, Mary Harron, Sue Ellen McCann. Cinematography, Andy Black, Federico Salsano. Editors, Sam Green, Dawn Logsdon. Narrated by Lili Taylor. Appearing as themselves: Bill Ayers, Bernadine Dohrn, Mark Rudd, Brian Flanagan, Todd Gitlin, Kathleen Cleaver, Naomi Jaffe and David Gilbert. Upstate Films. Shadow Distribution, 2003.

Documentary filmmakers Sam Green and Bill Siegel take viewers deep into the political unrest that gripped this country from the late 1960s into the mid-'70s. They focus on one of the era's most colorful manifestations — the young political radicals who called themselves The Weather Underground, who thought the revolution was coming, and they were leading the way.

You have to put this civic unrest in the context of the ongoing Vietnam War and the protests that raged on streets and campuses across the nation, and yes, here in Eugene at UO, although no one talks about it much these days. And you have to recognize that after Richard Nixon won the 1968 election, he turned the power of his administration into ridding the country of what he famously called “the same thugs and hoodlums that have always plagued good people.” Context: In March of 1969, Nixon (the “I am not a thug” president) and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia. In mid-October 1969, some 250,000 peaceful protestors marched on Washington.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) started as a non-violent movement, but by the time of its 1969 national convention, a radical faction of the organization led by national secretary and lawyer Bernadine Dohrn, Bill Ayers, Mark Rudd, David Gilbert and others broke away. In effect, this handful of committed activists took over the organization and its membership. An outraged Todd Gitlin, an SDS founder with strong non-violent convictions, calls the act “institutional piracy” in the film. Gitlin looks as if he's still pissed about the splintering of the group, and no wonder. It was never possible to organize students on that massive level again.

The Weathermen, as they were known, called for four “Days of Rage” in Chicago,

facing the armed might of the notoriously brutal Chicago police in the streets. Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, greatly admired by the Weathers, denounced the call. About 200 people showed up, which was a hard lesson learned early on.

The film alternates archival film footage with recent interviews. After a fatal explosion of a New York townhouse that killed three Weathermen, the press made a lot of noise about the “bomb factory.” The remaining activists went underground, to what Dohrn called a “parallel universe,” where many of them led ordinary lives, raised children and held jobs for years.

But some elements of the leadership continued to bomb, always making certain that safeguards were in place so no loss of life took place. They continued bombing into the 1970s, but once the Vietnam War was over, there was less to hold them together, and individuals began surfacing.

It's fascinating to see some of these people again. Dohrn is as beautiful as she ever was, and Ayers looks healthy and well. Naomi Jaffe reports how she thought doing nothing to stop the war was itself a violent act. Mark Rudd notes they wanted to bring the war to the streets of Amerika: “I would be taking an acid trip, and I would think about the Vietnam War.” David Gilbert is serving a life sentence for a Brinks robbery that went wrong in 1981.

With the exception of Gilbert, charges against the others were dropped by the FBI, because the agency had so blatantly violated the law itself. A major culprit was COINTELPRO, a 20-year-old secret government agency within the FBI that spied on American citizens and organizations without benefit of legal jurisdiction. CONINTELPRO targeted the Black Panthers, the civil rights movement, and the Weather Underground. (The program was discovered following the March 8, 1971 break-in of the offices of the FBI in Pennsylvania.)

This worthy film opens at the Bijou on Friday, Oct. 31. See it to learn what these people discovered about the use of violence and what they have to say today. And look with awe at the freedom of expression they had then, which is simply not available to you or me today without serious consequences.

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