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ClandesTime 150 – The Weather Underground

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The Weather Underground were the most active and successful militant left-wing group in US history. As part of their anti-Vietnam war operations they bombed the Pentagon, the State Department, corporate headquarters and other high-profile targets. In this episode I examine whether they were a lethal terrorist organisation, or a non-lethal militant anti-war gang. I look at their relationship with the FBI and the cinema of the Weather Underground, including how the FBI rewrote Robert Redford's movie *The Company You Keep*.

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Transcript



For those of you who don't know much about the Weathermen, they were an offshoot of the SDS – the Students for a Democratic Society, a radical leftist movement mostly based on college campuses. As the SDS started to fracture towards the end of the 60s, the Weather Underground emerged as the group advocating direct action, even violence, as a means of getting the job done. Up until then SDS had mostly focused on sit-ins, mass protests and other non-violent demonstrations.

For a brief history of the Weathermen we can turn to a lecture by Arthur Eckstein – a hippy history professor – at the Wilson Center in 2013.



Who were the Weather Underground?

Eckstein's lecture goes on to present two competing narratives about the Weather Underground. Narrative A is the one presented by Bill Ayers and other members of the Weather leadership, the Weather Bureau. It says that the townhouse explosion was the result of unauthorised crazies taking matters into their own hands. It presents the Weathermen as a horizontal structure with no central leadership and hence no responsibility for what one collective might do.

Narrative B is supported by other former members of the organisation, along with FBI files that were recently declassified. It says that the Fort Dix bombing plot was going to coincide with a similar bombing in Detroit – a coordinated attack, requiring some kind of central command or liaison between the two collectives. The Detroit bombing never happened because an FBI informant – Larry Grathwohl the only informant the FBI ever had within the Weathermen – told them where the dynamite was.

Eckstein makes a compelling case for the second narrative, that the Weather Underground was, at least at the end of 1969 and the beginning of 1970, a paramilitary terrorist organisation with national reach. Following the failure of the dual bombings plot and the tragedy at the townhouse, the Weathermen scattered and went underground, assuming fake identities. They did this expertly, indicative of a centralised command structure. For example, Al Qaeda did not manage to do this after 9/11.

The problem is that most of the tension between these two narratives is based on recollections decades later, in interviews and memoirs. I am certainly no expert in the evidence but I had noticed how most coverage of the Weathermen points

to the fact that they phoned in warnings and did their best not to kill anyone in their bombing campaign. This is certainly true for the post-townhouse period, when they bombed the ladies bathroom at the Pentagon, bombed the Capitol and so on. They managed not to kill anyone.

Indeed, another act of violence would signal the end of the organisation. Three former members of the group joined the May 19 Communist Organization, and in October 1981 they helped the Black Liberation Army rob a Brinks truck carrying \$1.6 million. Three people were killed, and all three former Weathermen were found guilty. Though the Weather Underground was already falling apart and fading, this is regarded by some as the moment it all came to an end.

This raises some important questions about guerilla violence and political warfare. For example, US military manuals on guerilla and terrorist gangs says that successful operations provide a psychological boost to the gang members, making them believe their cause is going to succeed. I think this is broadly true. When it came to the Weathermen the failure of the dual bombings plot and the loss of life at the townhouse led to a shift in strategy. Indeed, the fact that such a shift was possible shows how the leadership were in control, largely confirming one ex-member's account that all operations had to go up the chain of command for approval.

Likewise, the non-lethal bombing campaign was extremely successful, and this period in the early 70s was the Weather Underground at its peak. Indeed, despite being the target of COINTELPRO, the FBI basically didn't have the informants on the ground to be able to do much about this. So they turned to black bag operations, illegal wiretaps, warrantless searches and so on.

In April 1971 the Citizens Commission to Investigate the FBI – another radical left group – broke into an FBI office in Media, Pennsylvania and stole hundreds of Bureau documents. This included a large amount of information on the FBI's COINTELPRO operations against liberal and leftist groups. Unknown at that time, the CIA were also knee-deep in all this. When it became public, mostly via the Church Committee, government lawyers requested that all bomb and weapons charges against the Weathermen be dropped. This led to a situation where members could turn themselves in and face minimal charges, and several major cases were dropped because of illegal FBI tactics.

In 1980 the former deputy director of the FBI Mark Felt – best known as Deep Throat, or at least one of the people who made up Deep Throat – was prosecuted by the Carter administration and convicted. Despite being found guilty of illegal surveillance and large-scale breaching of citizens' constitutional rights he was let off with a fine of \$3500.

So neither the FBI nor the Weather Underground come out of this with a lot of credit. For some context we should note that in some ways they were the rebirth of the American anarchist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In both cases they were inspired by radical movements abroad, particularly in Europe. In both cases they were militant radical leftists.

On May 4th 1886 there was a mass labour demonstration in Haymarket, Chicago. In the midst of the protest an unidentified person through a bomb at the police, resulting in a riot in which both protestors and police died. The whole thing was blamed on anarchists.

Nearly a century later, on October 6th 1969, shortly before the Days of Rage riots organised by the Weathermen, they blew up a statue in Chicago commemorating the police casualties from the Haymarket Riot (but not the protestors). The statue was rebuilt, so exactly a year later the Weathermen blew it up again. It was rebuilt again and a 24-hour police guard kept watch over it, but the Weathermen blew it up once more. It was rebuilt again at Chicago police headquarters, where it has remained ever since.

This is one of the problems with political movements, even ones whose ultimate motives I agree with like the labour movement and the anti-war movement. The peaceful, democratic means of applying pressure on the establishment and forcing them to change, or at least stop doing some of the worst things they do, often don't work. They do not produce effective results. So you can either give up, or you can try something else. As Martin Luther King said, those who make peaceful revolution impossible make violent revolution inevitable.

But 'something else' doesn't have to be violent – for example, breaking into an FBI office and stealing documents is only a crime against property. These days it's more likely to be leakers and hackers, but it's the same thing. However, violence is attractive because of the romantic notion of the renegade, the outlaw – a notion that exists to some extent within all of us. Hence the popularity of everything from Breaking Bad to Bonnie and Clyde.

Violence can also be effective – I have no doubt the riots and the bombings helped motivate the Nixon government to find an end to the Vietnam War. It was by no means the only factor, not even one of the more important, but it was one of the reasons. Violence is most effective when it's against property, because people don't have much of a moral problem with it. Everyone likes seeing things blow up, hence the popularity of fireworks.

As such, I cannot wholly condemn nor praise the Weather Underground, I think Bill Ayers is a nut-job, and I don't understand what 'organic Stalinism' is supposed to mean. We organically send people to gulag? But I cannot help but be

impressed at their ability to strike extremely high-profile targets in a non-lethal fashion. It's risky, both for the bombers and for anyone nearby or who cleans up afterwards, but compared to the systemic violence they were objecting to, it is peanuts.

The Cinema of the Weather Underground

Contributing to the romanticised history of the Weathermen, several films have portrayed them very sympathetically. In 1975 the TV movie *Katherine the Radical* starring Sissy Spacek portrayed Dianne Oughton, who died in the Greenwich Village townhouse explosion. With all the evidence we have today we can say this film is not very accurate, and that Dianne was probably centrally involved in the Fort Dix bombing plot. I'm not saying she deserved to die, simply that by most accounts she was at the heart of the push towards lethal violence and if you live by the sword then this is what happens.

There was also the 1976 documentary *Underground*, co-directed by radical filmmaker Haskell Wexler. It included interviews with members of the group, concealed so they could not be identified. The FBI found out about the film and subpoenaed the footage, trying both to stop the film being released and gather intelligence on members of the group. The film-makers resisted and with the help of celebrities including Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty the subpoenas were overturned.

Another documentary – 2002's *The Weather Underground* – can easily be found online and was nominated for an Academy Award. It very much presents a romantic image of the group, and buys into Bill Ayers' and other's version of the townhouse explosion, which conveniently exonerates Ayers of any responsibility.



Aside from this rather simplified view of the Weather Underground in its early days it is a very good documentary, it explains the political philosophy of the group and tells a fairly linear story of its progression. As a primer, and a historical record, it is excellent, but like so many documentaries I think the filmmakers got a little too close to their subject. Then again, this is the predominant narrative across most accounts of the group, and the film does include ex-members who expressed remorse about what they did.

The Company You Keep

Most recently there was Robert Redford's movie *The Company You Keep*, based on the novel of the same title. It tells a somewhat fictionalised story, obviously inspired by real people and events. Essentially, instead of the Brinks truck robbers being caught, this is transposed into a bank robbery where one person was killed and the culprits escaped. 30 years later they are middle-aged and living out their lives when one of them – Sharon Solarz played by Susan Sarandon – decides to turn herself in. She is arrested by the FBI, setting off a chain of events that are investigated and somewhat revealed by a journalist, played by Shia Labeouf.

This includes one ex-member who is living as a lawyer in Albany under the assumed name Jim Grant. I won't give it away, but he is clearly based on a real person. If you watch the whole Arthur Eckstein presentation then you'll probably figure it out. Grant is played by Robert Redford, and he is pursued by both the journalist and the FBI, so he has to leave his young daughter with his brother in New York before tracking down another ex-member of the group – Mimi Lurie, played by Julie Christie. He hopes she can help him clear his name and tell the Feds he wasn't even at the bank on the day of the robbery.

It's somewhat curious that Redford produced, directed and starred in this film because he played an investigative reporter in *All the President's Men*, alongside Dustin Hoffman. Hoffman lived virtually next door to the Greenwich village townhouse which exploded and killed three members of the Weather Underground. You can even find pictures of him at the scene.

As I'm sure you've noticed, this film has an A-list cast, helped no doubt by the fact Redford is a very nice guy who comes across as genuine in what he does. I can see people wanting to work with him for very little money. The whole film was made for an estimated \$2 million, and took nearly \$20 million worldwide despite mixed reviews. In my opinion it's a pretty good film, a solid thriller with plenty of well-written dialogue and strong performances from its ensemble cast. It is something of a throwback, it is shot in a quaint 1970s style and that, along with its subject matter, is probably why it did better internationally than it did in the US.

However, it does present largely the same romanticised version of the Weather Underground as most other tellings of this story. Robert Redford clearly has some affection for leftist radicals, and to be fair the initial script was fairly hard-hitting. It was critical of the FBI, which is accurate because they did no end of illegal things in their harassment and opposition to the group, as with many others such as the Black Panthers and the Civil Rights movement.

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While you might forgive Redford for needing some heroes in his story and therefore going soft on the Weathermen, he did capitulate to the FBI when it came to their portrayal in the film. A spreadsheet detailing FBI involvement in Hollywood mentioned that they rewrote around 30 scenes in the film, in exchange for providing advice and information along with access for filming and use of the official FBI seal and the like. So I filed a FOIA request for any documents detailing these changes, and recently got back 18 pages of emails between the film-makers and the FBI's entertainment liaison office.

It is clear that the FBI thoroughly reviewed the script and that most of the changes were conveyed via conference calls, so precise details aren't recorded. But we can work a few things out by reading these documents and watching the film, which is what I did. Basically, the FBI removed or changed any scene where they were depicted doing anything corrupt or illegal or not by-the-book. As a result, they are the utmost professionals in the finished film, when the original script had them doing some fairly dubious if not explicitly illegal things.

An email summarising the FBI's involvement in the film says that in exchange for prop and wardrobe information along with answering some questions and permission to use the FBI seal they provided advice and 'made substantive script changes' regarding:

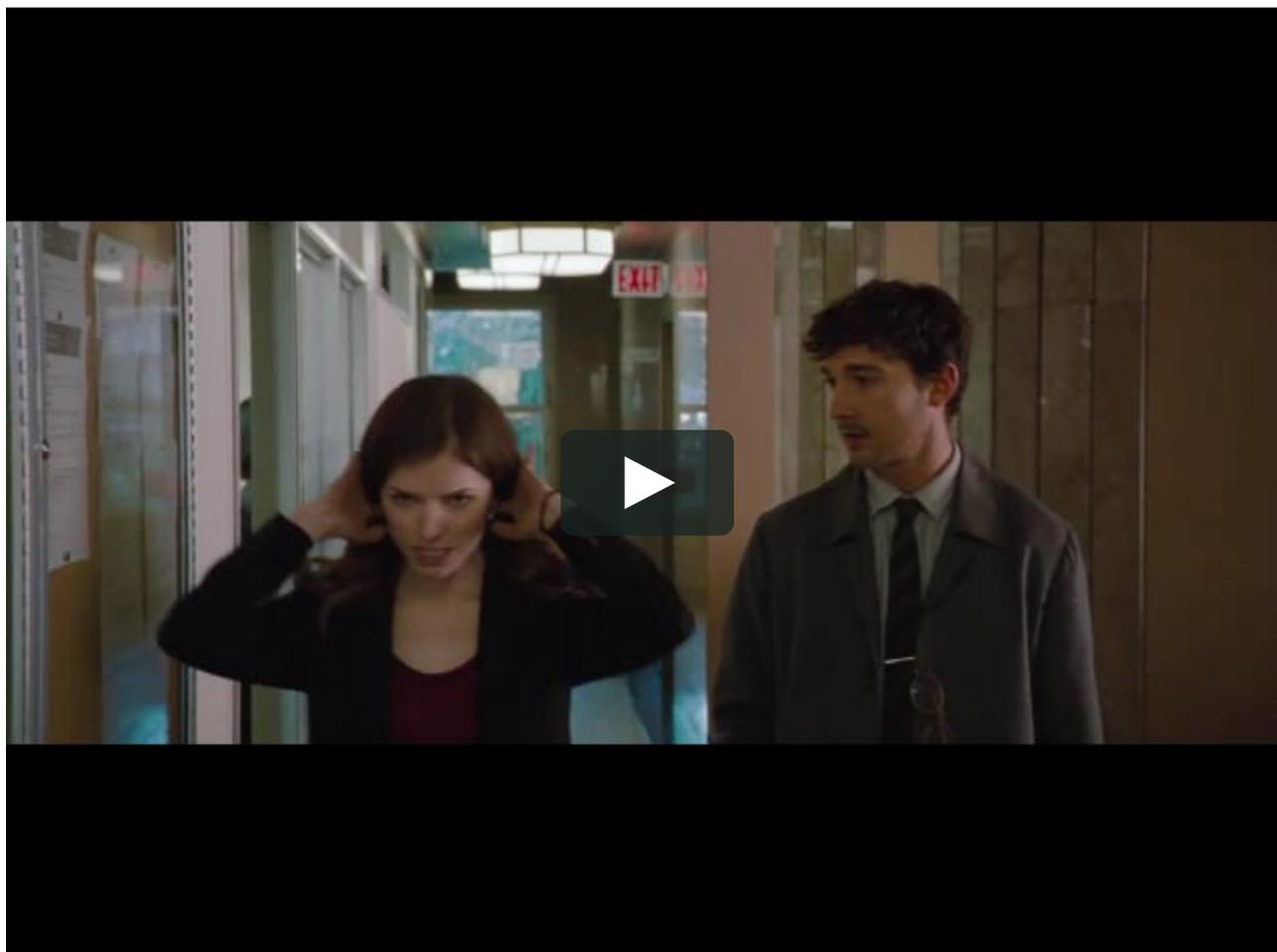
- 1) Excessive Force arresting a housewife driving to turn herself in.
- 2) Pre-emptive arrest
- 3) Cops attitude towards Feds
- 4) Surveillance procedures, surreptitious photography
- 5) Allowing a reporter to hit up the FBI for a favor in exchange for news fairness
- 6) Necessity of search warrant to search a home
- 7) Myth that FBI has a file or access to info on everyone instantaneously even if no crime has been committed
- 8) Agent relationship with a source
- 9) FBI fake reporting of a bomb in a building to get it evacuated
- 10) Misconception that FBI can offer a 'deal' in exchange for information
- 11) FBI jurisdiction over possession of marijuana vs distribution of drugs
- 12) Agent giving source classified info
- 13) Giving a reporter classified information
- 14) Wiretap procedures
- 15) How FBI agent weapons are handled at a courthouse
- 16) FBI presence in Ann Arbor, Michigan
- 17) Helicopters at each field office
- 18) Building security procedures
- 19) Policy on armed law enforcement partners entering building
- 20) Procedure when a 30-year fugitive is arrested
- 21) Protocol if fugitive is wanted out of Detroit but captured in NY
- 22) Where fugitives are held and processed
- 23) FBI raid on a hotel
- 24) Agents dress
- 25) Raid gear
- 26) Junior vs senior agents dress, behaviour
- 27) Flak jackets
- 28) When agents are armed
- 29) Difference between a situation team and CTOC.

Some of these changes are relatively trivial but some indicate that there was at one point a quite different script for this movie. For example, other emails show that there was a scene before Sharon is arrested where the FBI listen in on a phonecall between her and another ex-member of Weather called Billy. Billy is growing and maybe dealing marijuana, but the FBI insisted that they'd have to know he was using the phone for that purpose in order to convince a judge to give them the wiretap. So that scene was cut completely.

Similarly, in that phonecall scene Sharon says she's going to hand herself in, but the FBI didn't like being portrayed as violently arresting someone on their way to turn themselves in and confess. This is another reason the phonecall scene was scrapped, and when Sharon is arrested it is done very professionally and carefully.

Then there's the sequence where Jim Grant goes to New York to drop off his daughter with his brother and the FBI find the hotel, so he has to set off the fire alarm to create a diversion so he can escape. It seems that in the original script the NYPD don't know about the FBI's operation and there's some kind of spat between them. This was removed from the script, as was a scene where the FBI call in a fake bomb threat in order to evacuate the building as part of their search for Grant.

Where things get even more interesting is in the relationship between the journalist played by Shia LeBeouf and his ex-girlfriend who works for the FBI, played by Anna Kendrick. In the original script the FBI agent tells the journalist about Billy, the FBI wiretap on him and, it seems, why they had a wiretap on him (i.e. the dope-dealing business). This was all problematic for the Bureau, so they changed the script and we ended up with this:



Note how the FBI agent accidentally reveals that somewhere in the case there are wiretaps, but there's no suggestion of why they're tapping Billy's phone or what they heard or that they knew Sharon was going to turn herself in, or that the wiretap might have been illegal. All those elements were in the original version to

some extent, and all were changed or removed by the FBI. She does give the reporter Billy's name at the end of the scene, but there's no explicit agreement that this is in exchange for more positive reporting for the local FBI field office. Instead it's all about their former romantic relationship. As a brief aside – Billy is played by Stephen Root, one of my favourite supporting actors in everything from Office Space to Fargo.

The upshot of these script changes was to make it clear that the FBI do everything above board, whether in dealing with a journalist, working with an informant, or carrying out surveillance and investigations. As a consequence, any notion of them behaving in a corrupt, violent or illegal fashion was scotched from the screenplay.

This leaves the thrust of the story, which is about a bunch of ex-radicals coming to terms with their past in various ways. Sharon turns herself in, hoping that she can serve her sentence and still get out in time to be a proper part in her children's lives. Jim is trying to clear his name so he can continue his life with his young daughter, though it turns out he also has another, adult daughter with Mimi. As part of his trip to track down Mimi, Jim goes to see a college professor who is clearly based on Bill Ayers. The professor doesn't want anything to do with all this because he's now a public figure with a reputation, but even he cannot truly escape his past. Whether this is a metaphor for Bill Ayers reinventing himself as an intellectual and denying that the Weather leadership had anything to do with the Detroit and Fort Dix bombing plot, I'm not sure.

As Redford said in the interview clip I played above, he was trying to take a hard look at the Weather Underground, and while his film is somewhat romanticised the Jim character has a number of conversations where they get into the moral questions of political violence. There's a nice dialogue between him and the history professor in an art gallery, but the most potent scene is towards the end of the film, when he finally tracks down Mimi.



As such, *The Company You Keep* does offer some criticism of the Weather Underground, more so than any of the other cinematic depictions, while still maintaining a generally positive depiction of the group. The FBI did not seek to change these elements of the script, only those where the Bureau were portrayed critically. The result of this is that what started out as a relatively even-handed script that criticised both the Weathermen and the FBI became a film that only criticised the Weathermen. The FBI erased their own crimes from the 1960s and 70s, even though the story was transposed onto the modern day.

So while this is a fictional story, somewhat based on real people and events, this is a rewriting of history by a government agency. Even when their misdeeds are told metaphorically or shifted to a different period of time, the same principles of upholding the public image of the state are applied. In exchange for giving permissions to the film-makers and answering a few questions about protocols and props they de-fanged the script, removing the critical material about themselves and thus making the film politically unbalanced.

I don't know what Redford makes of all this because I cannot find a single comment from him about the FBI's influence on the screenplay. While the US Coast Guard are credited at the end of the film – despite only appearing in one not-particularly-important scene – the FBI were not credited. What started out as an idealistic story was, ironically, compromised by the same forces that fought the Weather Underground back in the 1960s and 70s.

As such *The Company You Keep* is a symbolic, artistic representation of the very real struggle the Weathermen faced. In making this film Redford and the others had to submit, at least in part, to the same state power and agency that illegally pursued the Weather Underground. In short, the FBI won and the Weather Underground lost, both in terms of real history and in terms of its re-telling through cinema. In both cases we're left wondering what might have been.



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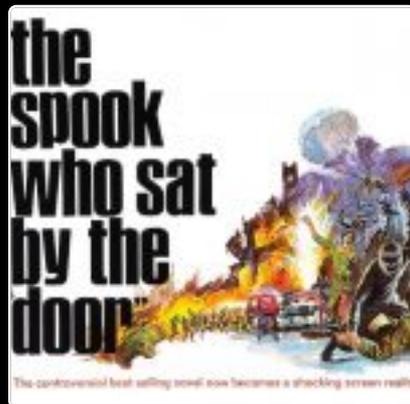
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