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Imperialism and Solidarity in the Age of Trump. Weather Underground (WUO) Activists Speak Out on the Media

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Featured image: "Empire always, then and now, cloaks itself in the garments of mystification and deceit," says Bill Ayers. (Photo: Lloyd Lee / Flickr)

Seven months into the so-called administration of President Donald Trump, things are going further off the rails with each passing day. From the fires of war to attacks on health care to the stoking of the white supremacist far right, living in the bowels of a rotting empire has, perhaps, never been as intense.

As questions swirl around the nature of contemporary resistance, another period of rising protest comes to mind: the Vietnam-war era, when radical political activism in this country reached new levels.

In 1970, the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), a group that emerged out of Students for a Democratic Society, issued a "Declaration of a State of War" against the US government, and shortly thereafter began carrying out bombings against symbols of US Empire, including even the Pentagon itself. Targeting mostly government buildings and several banks — and taking care not to injure human beings — the actions were designed to "bring the war home" in order to highlight imperial injustices against the oppressed, and the egregious violence of US imperialism.

Having interviewed the founding members of this group before, Truthout now brings you their perspectives on the media, why they did what they did, and where they see things going from here in the US and beyond.

The Role of the Media

Bernardine Dohrn, one of the co-founders and a leader of the WUO, discussed the media's coverage of the Vietnam War and other liberation movements around the world at that time. What she shared is particularly poignant, given the crisis of the media in the age of President Donald Trump.

She spoke of the US military being keenly aware of the need to control the media's message during the Vietnam War.

> "[The Media's role was] so important that the US military learned to never again allow independent journalists into their war zones," Dohrn explained. "[Significantly], the mainstream media never again allowed images of human

> people, families, women or children who suffer the consequences of US bombings or invasions."

With the dominant media avoiding these responsibilities, one of the many roles the WUO played was, according to Dohrn, to communicate to the public the ways in which people, cultures and whole civilizations were suffering under US air strikes and CIA repression.

> "The media was plenty corporatized during the '60s and '70s, and it was the anti-war movement in concert with the Black Freedom Movement and the returning vets who changed the hearts and minds of the US people from 1965-1968," she said.

WUO member David Gilbert told Truthout he believes it was the strength of the anti-war movement, and the US losses in Vietnam, that finally pushed sectors of the media to start reporting some of the truth about the war.

He echoes Dohrn's point that the media was already corporatized back then (though the conglomerates were not nearly as large as they are today), and the pro-war bias of the media was just as real as it is now.

> "An example was the use of napalm bombs, designed to cling to and burn through flesh, on civilians," Gilbert said. "The mainstream media completely whited-out these horrible war crimes."

In fact, in January 1967 a radical magazine, Ramparts, published a series of color photos of children and babies burned by napalm.

> "That's the point when some of us became absolutely frantic to stop the war," Gilbert said. "But it also exposed the mainstream media for what they were covering up."

According to Gilbert, by 1967 a whole network of small radical papers had a combined readership of roughly 6 million, making up a crucial wing of the movement. Of course, it was therefore ripe for targeting by intelligence agencies.

> "An important part of the FBI and police offensive to beat the radical movements was to destroy the radical media, a campaign that's detailed in Geoffrey Rips's UnAmerican Activities," he said.

By the late '60s, largely due to constant pressure from the increasingly powerful anti-war movement, portions of the media started to come around to presenting some of the realities of the Vietnam War. Plus, by then, it was clear the US was likely going to lose the war, US brutality abroad was being exposed to the world, and the political upheaval on the home front was becoming white hot.

Gilbert went on to explain how, then as now,

> "The hawks waged a concerted campaign to blame that on 'the liberal media,'

> to the point that this lie has become accepted today."

At that time, the myth of the "liberal media" accomplished several things for the right wing, according to Gilbert.

> "It's covered up the truth that the US military machine was defeated by a Global South nation, it's convinced the public that the 'truth lies somewhere in between' the hawks and the media, when in fact the media didn't do nearly enough to expose the injustice and horrors of the war, and it's intimidated the media, which fell into line as pure propaganda organs in subsequent wars."

Naomi Jaffe, one of the WUO's founding members who joined in solidarity with movements for Black self-determination, agreed with Gilbert in that pressure from the anti-war movement was a leading factor that pushed the media to share more images of the war. However, she was quite critical of the overall role the media played during Vietnam.

> "Remember the Gulf of Tonkin? Not a hint of independent reporting ever questioned it until long after the war was over," Jaffe told Truthout. "The body counts? Regular reports of how the US was winning by killing more 'Viet Cong' every week than could possibly have existed overall."

Bill Ayers, who is married to Dohrn, was also a leader and cofounder of the WUO.

> "Empire always, then and now, cloaks itself in the garments of mystification and deceit," Ayers said. "The message from the corporate media was unambiguous: the US loves peace and fights only when it must, and always selflessly in defense of freedom and democracy."

For example, Ayers says, the New York Times announced that it saw the "light at the end of the tunnel" — the turning point when the war would at long last be turned around and won — days before the decisive defeat during the Tet Offensive in 1968. In 1966, Walter Cronkite, CBS anchor and the most trusted journalist of his generation, presented a fawning interview with the puppet and fascist Nguyen Cao Ky and called him the George Washington of Viet Nam.

> "The lies and misdirection go on and on," Ayers said. "And don't believe the narcissistic media today rewriting its role in moving the country against the war 50 years ago, making itself a forerunner and a major actor, heroizing its efforts and turning reality on its head."

Ayers said it wasn't the media that played a role in helping end the war in Vietnam, it was, by far, the decisive actions of the Vietnamese people themselves "in defeating the most potent military force on earth." He pointed out,

> "Vietnam was engaged in an authentic social revolution, deep and broad, in which peasants and workers were massively engaged in the overthrow of colonialism and foreign control as well as feudal relationships and capitalism itself."

Moreover, Ayers said, this revolution was part of "the anti-colonial and Third World moment, a context that allowed us to understand the revolution in Vietnam as part of a world phenomenon sweeping from South Africa to Egypt to Chile to Indonesia."

He also pointed to "the important role of the underground — popular or alternative or movement — press in the US, and its ability to tap international sources like the Cuban media, for example, to uncover the truth of events."

He sees the typical narrative — the idea that the military draft made the war real in the eyes of the US public, and the media cemented that reality, helping to end the war — as skewed. It "buys into a simplistic and largely self-serving explanation," Ayers said. "The Vietnamese revolution and war resistance at home impacted the media coverage, not the other way around."

A Mandate for Solidarity

The WUO was grounded in a politics of solidarity with the oppressed, including economic, status and race-based oppression.

> "The most immediate impetus to underground action was the government's refusal to end the war and, most particularly, the lethal attacks on the Black Liberation Movement," Gilbert said, of why he joined. "Twenty-eight Black Panthers were killed between 1968 and 1971. So, first and foremost we moved on to illegal actions as a fundamental mandate for solidarity, in the context, as argued above, of the sense of responsibility, of world revolution."

Gilbert referred to the bombings carried out by the WUO as "armed propaganda," as there was no pretense of having a military impact, in addition to the fact that the bombings were carried out with the greatest care not to kill or injure any people.

> "The point of the actions is their effect on consciousness by spotlighting the forces — government and corporate — responsible for damage and death to the oppressed, and to show people that there are still creative and daring ways to fight the powers-that-be despite repression," Gilbert explained. "Each action was accompanied by a well-reasoned communiqué explaining the political issues involved."

Ayers explained that they acted because they were outraged at the injustices, and because they thought a more just world was within their reach — that their sacrifices would count for something.

> "These elements are each indispensable if we are to ignite a progressive social struggle," he said. "Knowing that things are unjust or terrible is never quite enough. We always need a vision and a palpable sense of the world we're fighting for."

Ayers noted that this vision is essential for a sense of sustained motivation, at both the individual and the collective levels.

> "The world is as it is, a mass of contradictions and tragedies, rich with beauty

> and human accomplishment and possibility, vicious with human denial — an organism that both drains us and replenishes us, gives us life and kills us," he said. "What gets me up in the morning is all the unnecessary suffering, the undeserved pain, and also a sense that we can and must do better."

Jaffe pointed out that US "mainstream society" — the recipient of the loot of US global dominance — does not represent the majority of humanity.

> "Our view of 'mainstream' needs to be global and relate to those whom Arundhati Roy calls 'the subjects of Empire,'" she said. "One of the most electrifying breakthroughs in consciousness for me, as I think for many others of my generation, was Malcolm X exhorting us to stop referring to people of color as 'minorities,' because people of color are the vast majority of the people of the world."

All of the WUO members agreed that the confluence of consciousness between the most oppressed groups in the US and the rest of the world created the wave of hope and possibility that — without ever being "mainstream" — came to define the '60s and '70s. That type of confluence is crucial, Jaffe said, for any real liberation.

> "It would necessitate the overthrow of the US ruling class and its role as the dominant world power," she said. "But understood as being in the interests of the vast majority of humanity, that goal becomes imaginable."

Sense of Urgency

An imaginable set of goals is essential because, Gilbert points out, our resistance to the US ruling class must take on a sense of great urgency.

> "Capitalism has us hurtling towards a climate catastrophe that could ruin the Earth as a habitat for any sizable human population and, of course, has exterminated or threatened countless other species," he said. "Already, the effects of climate change have killed huge numbers of people, greatly intensified local conflicts over diminishing resources and created large numbers of desperate climate refugees."

Gilbert sees climate disruption as having the potential to unite people around the world behind a shared goal. However, he says, climate disruption doesn't affect everyone equally, and it's crucial to center the most marginalized people, who tend to be the most impacted.

> "The movement can't be on the terms of a relatively privileged, small sector," Gilbert said. "We always need to put the interests, visions, aspirations of the most oppressed, the vast majority, in the forefront."

Ayers also sees the need for a massive social revolution. He argues that we must become even *more* radical, in the strict sense of the term — we must reach more thoroughly to the root of things.

"We need to study, learn, organize, talk to strangers, mobilize, display our ethical

aspirations publicly," he said, adding that on the important issues of the last two centuries, political radicals from Jane Addams and Emma Goldman, to John Brown and Harriet Tubman, to Eugene Debs and W.E.B. Du Bois, have gotten it right.

> "The legacy continues with the work of Ella Baker and Septima Clark, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X … and on up to today," Ayers added. "Of course, as Ella Baker said, 'Martin didn't create the movement, the movement created Martin,' and it's true: For every remembered leader there were hundreds, thousands putting their shoulders on history's wheel."

Dwelling in Possibility

Today, future prospects certainly appear dire on many fronts.

Nevertheless, all of the WUO members Truthout interviewed still have their eyes fixed on the goals of true justice and liberation, and they believe it remains possible to bring about that liberated world. From the US's rigid educational system to its brutal incarceration system to the violence of borders, Ayers says a wholly different vision is within reach. The promise of that radical vision is what sparked WUO's actions decades ago, and it remains relevant.

> "We wanted to say goodbye to schooling that's arid, dry, self-referencing and self-satisfied, to teaching as a trivial pursuit of the obvious, to deference, didacticism, ego and complacency in a heartless world, to prisons and border guards and walls — whether in Palestine or in Texas — and to quarantines, deletions and closures," Ayers explained. "We wanted to welcome the unknown, to say hello to jumping off the edge, to endlessly learning how to live again and how to love anew, to the dance of the dialectic."

During the advent of the WUO and its time of existence, Ayers said they tried to embrace relentless curiosity, simple acts of kindness, the complexity and wonder of humanity, the poetics of resistance, history, agency, world peace and inner peace. They wanted to embrace the surprising and contradictory harmonies of love at all times — the hope that love held out for a better world.

In other words, it wasn't a small vision.

> "We wanted free love and free land, free food and free housing, dancing in the streets and daring to taste it all with a kiss," Ayers said. "So, my expansive and expanding dreams are not realized, of course, not yet, not in my lifetime, but neither are they dimmed nor diminished. I've tried to live with one foot in the mud and muck of the world as it is, and another foot striving toward a world that could be, but is not yet. Like other freedom lovers, I'm still trying to dwell in possibility."

Dohrn draws much strength from the many current justice movements like Black Lives Matter, and Undocumented and Unafraid, because,

> "They point to the world we want to live in, as they invite solidarity and build unity."

Jaffe acknowledges that while the Trump victory "certainly stirred many to action," she believes that hope, not despair, is the best spur to action. She believes it is necessary to have a radical analysis that goes beyond the mainstream tenets emerging in the post-election furor.

> "We need an analysis that sees Democrats and Republicans as two wings of the same ruling class and Trump not as a blip on the march of progress," she said, "but a continuation of the white supremacy, corporatization, totalitarian surveillance, mass incarceration, and global aggression that are firmly grounded in [the US's] 400-year history of enslavement and genocide."

Ayers commented that he has no nostalgia for the '60s, which have now been thoroughly commodified and sold back to us as a set of distorted myths and symbols.

> "It happened — and it was neither as brilliant and ecstatic as some would have it, nor the devil's own workshop as others insist — and it's time to move on," he said. "Whatever it was, it remains prelude to the necessary changes and fundamental upheavals just ahead. Let's get busy living, loving, linking arms and rising up right now."

What do we need in order to jump in? Ayers sees the necessary tools everywhere.

> "Humor and art, protest and spectacle, the quiet, patient intervention and the angry and urgent thrust — and the rhythm of and recipe for activism is always the same: We open our eyes and look unblinkingly at the world as we find it; we are astonished by the beauty and horrified at the suffering all around us; we dive into the wreckage and swim as hard as we can toward a distant and indistinct shore; we dry ourselves off, doubt that our efforts made enough difference, and so we rethink, recalibrate, look again and dive in once more," Ayers said. "Organize, mobilize, agitate, resist, build the social movement, connect. Repeat for a lifetime."

Dahr Jamail, a Truthout staff reporter, is the author of The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan (Haymarket Books, 2009), and Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from Iraq for more than a year, as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last 10 years, and has won the Martha Gellhorn Award for Investigative Journalism, among other awards.

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